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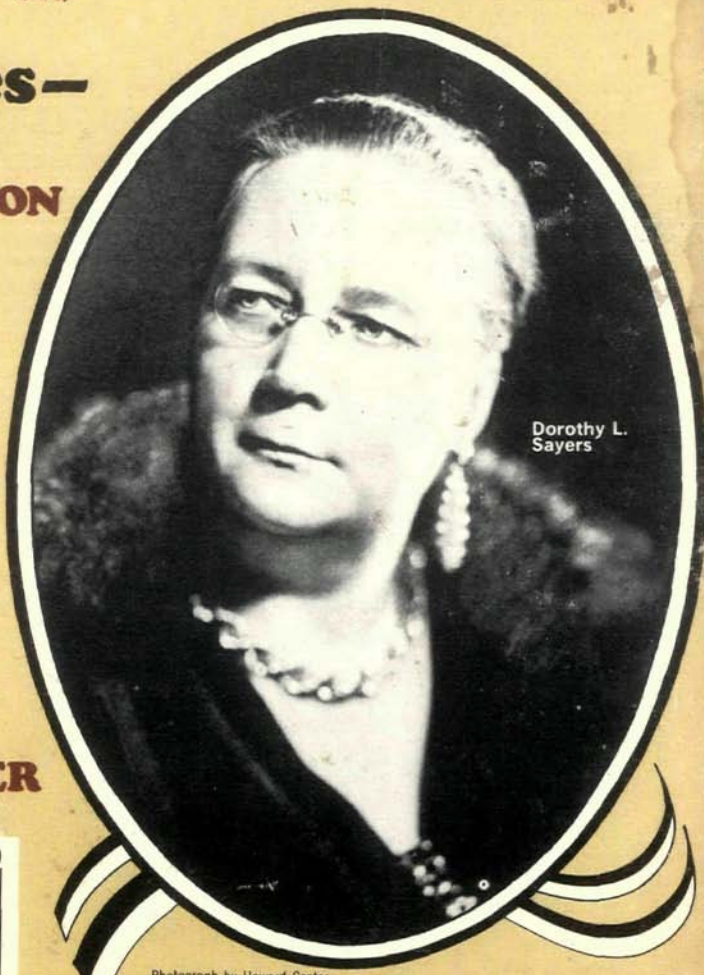

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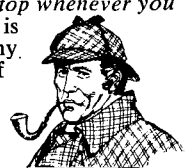

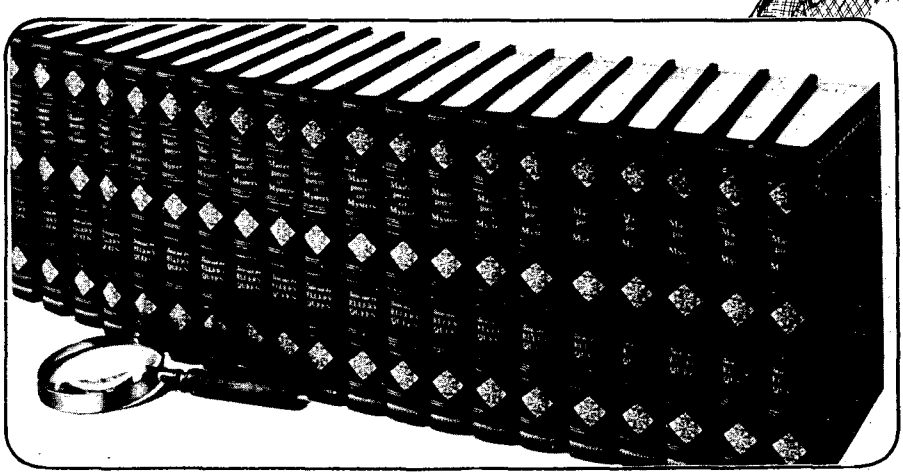

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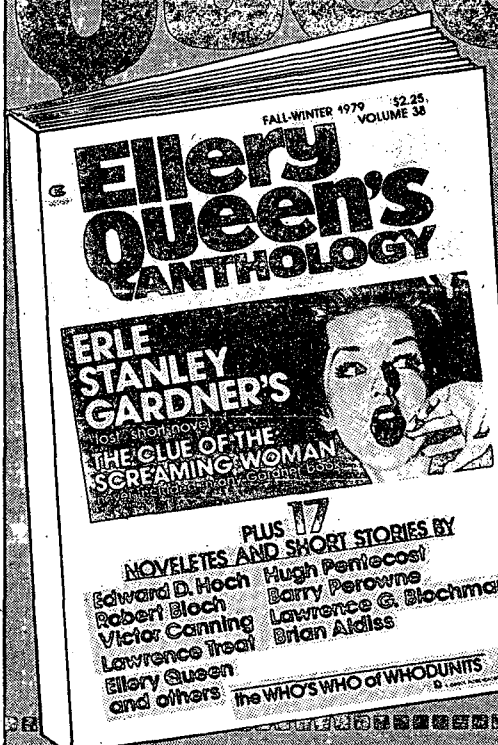

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a *NEW* Charlie Dark story by

BRIAN GARFIELD

Dark versus Rice—the continuing battle between Charlie Dark, the best counterspy in the business, and his boss who hates Charlie's guts so much that he drops all the dirtiest and most difficult assignments in Charlie's lap. This one takes Charlie to Hong Kong, among other places in the Pacific, and it just might involve a new kind of espionage. As the chief-of-station said, "It's a back-alley trade," and as Charlie said, "I want to get out where the air's cleaner" . . .

CHARLIE'S CHASE

by BRIAN GARFIELD

"I've got a paper chase for you." Rice was unusually mellow. He neither bared his teeth nor puffed cigar smoke in my face. "I want you to look through the Hong Kong reports for the past ten weeks."

"What for?"

"You tell me."

When I returned to his fourth-floor office he cocked his head to one side. "Well?"

"Some weeks ago someone began systematically to double our China agents."

"So it would seem. I wanted to make certain of my readings of the reports—that's why I didn't give you any hint what to look for. But you saw it too."

"It's a visible pattern."

"Yes. Well, you'd better get out there and put a stop to it, hadn't you." Then for the first time he smiled. Rice's smile would frighten a piranha. It meant only that he hoped I would end up in trouble to my hairline.

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As I went to the door he said to my back, "You've got to go on a diet, Charlie. You hardly fit through doors any more—you haven't got any sideways." He was still smiling—a wicked glitter of polished teeth.

I caught the noon flight from Dulles. The next day, fuzzy with jet lag, I descended on the China Station.

Pete Morgan, the chief-of-station, was dour and dismal, his normal hey-buddy ebullience crushed under a weight of worry. I had known him for years and never seen him so morose. "I've been wondering when somebody would show up with a hatchet. In a way I'm glad it's you, Charlie. You're tough but you're fair. I never heard of you railroading anybody just for the sake of marking up a score on your record sheet."

"I'm obliged for the vote of confidence, Pete, but if you know about the trouble why haven't you done something about it?"

"You think I haven't? I've given seven men the chop so far—two of them damned useful informants."

"You've interrogated them?"

"Certainly."

"And?"

"Four of them denied it. Three of them admit it." He showed his despair. "They *admit* they've been bought—bribed with huge sums in Swiss banks and new passports and visas that will set them up in South America like baronets."

I stood at the window of his office and tried to make sense of it. Below me the Kowloon traffic of pedestrians and cars and tricycle-rickshas thronged the narrow street. I said, "The whole point of doubling an agent is not to let his employers know he's been doubled."

"Exactly. They're busting all the rules."

"So they're not really being doubled, are they?"

He said, "I can only see one answer. They're trying to destroy my network."

"Why?"

"You tell me and we'll both know."

Pete's network wasn't concerned with mainland China; that was another—and far more vast—outfit with headquarters in Langley itself and branch monitoring stations in Kyoto, Seoul, Hong Kong, Taipei, Rangoon, and Delhi. Pete's more modest operation covered Singapore, Djakarta, Formosa, Macao, and Hong Kong itself—the

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seething corrupt smuggling ports of the western Pacific. We had a substation in each of them but their operations were under Pete's direct control. And it appeared he was right: someone was systematically tearing the network apart.

Pete said, "It's so damned methodical. Like a bulldozer. I don't know who and I don't know why. We used everything but rubber hoses on the seven people we've busted so far. I'll show you the interrogation reports. Three of them cooperated, more or less, but all they know is they were offered six-figure bribes. The offers came by phone from public call boxes and everything else came in the mail, plain envelopes, untraceable. Now I've got taps on most of my remaining agents' phones—if the opposition calls again maybe we can get some voiceprints."

It was a crude destructive attack without any of the clandestine finesse that usually characterized warfare in our field—it was as if someone had decided to conclude a game of chess by blasting all the pieces off the board with a fire hose.

"I don't know how to fight this kind of thing," Pete complained. "It doesn't make any kind of sense. They must know we know they're doing it—and they just don't care. What kind of espionage is that?"

I said, "It's cover for something. They want us to be deaf and blind so that they can pull off something they don't want us to know about."

"They. Who's they?"

"Anything could be happening out there—right now we wouldn't know about it, would we?"

"If you want the ball, Charlie, I'll be happy to toss it over in your court."

Yes, I thought. That was why Rice had picked me for the job. He hates me so much that he drops all the dirtiest ones in my lap.

Pete said, "Does Langley want my scalp?"

"Not yet. They're as baffled as you are. Nobody's putting the finger on you."

"Ultimately it's my responsibility. The buck stops here."

"Why didn't you make a full report on this?"

He was surprised. "I did. To the Security Executive."

Rice.

"Didn't you read it?" he asked. "I thought that was why you came."

Rice, I thought. Rice and his "need-to-know" compartmentalization. He'd had Pete's report in his drawer all the time but he'd

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withheld it from me. I could picture his mock-sweet smile: *I didn't want to clutter your head with Pete Morgan's prejudged opinions, Charlie. Better you go into it with an open mind.*

I said, "Let me have those interrogation debriefings. And can you have sandwiches sent up?"

"Didn't you have breakfast at the hotel?"

"I did. But I'm hungry."

The Agency keeps threatening to put me out to pasture and Rice keeps intervening in my behalf—not because he likes me but because he needs me: without me to sweep up his messes he'd be out on his own ear.

One of the reasons the Agency hasn't made good its threat to retire me is that my head is a computer-bank of facts, experiences, and associations stretching all the way back to the days of the OSS when I cut my teeth in the trade. Often a remembered iota will put me on the track of something vital when the same trivial item might pass straight over the heads of the pushbutton whiz kids in Covert Operations. It pays to keep one fossil around for the sake of continuity.

It was such an item from the deep past that provided me with a pointer toward the solution of this case. Going through the transcripts of the interviews with the three doubled agents who'd confessed, I found a clue that kept appearing like a bad penny.

"And then this voice on the phone said I could live out my days in paradise with the visas and all that money."

"He said I'd be able to quit grubbing around in these stinking Macao sewers and move my whole family to paradise."

"He asked me how I'd like to be rich and carefree and spend the rest of my days in paradise."

It echoed in my mind various conversations I'd had down through the years with Karl Jurgens. A slim and possibly misleading hint to be sure; but Karl had been smitten with the idea of a paradise for his retirement. It was one of his favorite words.

"Karl Jurgens?" A look of alarm passed across Pete Morgan's face. "He's a scary one. But didn't he retire from the Abwehr?"

"Some years ago."

That made him dubious. "If that's all you've come up with, it seems to me we're back to square one."

"Just the same I want to send out a few coded cables."

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The replies to my cables trickled in during the next 24 hours. In the meantime Pete's office was a shambles, trying to deal with three more defections that had come to light. Pete's security people dragged one of them in for questioning and I sat in. The compromised agent was a Chinese cleaning lady with a sheepish expression; she kept shaking her head apologetically and wringing her hands. "I knew I should not have accepted this temptation but it was so very much money—enough to support my children in comfort for the rest of their lives. Not like the bits of money you pay me." She gave Pete a pathetically defiant look.

He made a face and said in an aside to me, "I ought to get a transcript of this to those idiots that keep trimming our budgets."

I drew the woman's attention. "What did he say to you when he made the offer? Do you remember his words?"

"Not really, sir. It was just a voice on a telephone."

Pete said, "We got a voiceprint—the call was taped. The man spoke Mandarin Chinese with a Peking accent."

"More people in the world speak Mandarin Chinese than any other language," I said drily. "In any case it's probably a red herring. This isn't a Chinese operation."

"What makes you think that?"

"The Chinese have been dealing in subtle intrigue for three thousand years. This isn't their style—it's far too crude." I went back to the frightened woman. "Did he offer you anything specific besides the money and visas?"

I was fishing for a word but I didn't want to put it in her mouth.

She sighed wistfully. Her head tipped back and she murmured, "He offered me paradise."

I assembled the cables in order and dropped them on Pete's desk. "He's been living in retirement on Tahiti."

"Karl Jurgens? He found his paradise then."

"But he's not there now." I indicated the cables.

Pete sat up and looked.

I said, "He left eleven weeks ago on a plane for Djakarta. Coincidence? Within a week of his arrival in Djakarta you started losing agents. Djakarta, Taipei—he was sighted there two weeks later—they're both major substations on your network and that's where you lost the first two agents. If we keep digging I'm sure we'll find traces of him in Macao and here in Hong Kong. It's Karl all right. No doubt of it."

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"But what's he up to? Surely the West German government can't be running this caper. They're on *our* side, aren't they?"

"It's not a German caper. It's got to be a freelance job. He's hired himself out as a mercenary. Probably started to run short of money to sustain him in paradise."

"Hired himself out where? Who's the villain and why's he doing these things to us?"

"I guess I'd better ask Karl, " I said.

Karl Jurgens and I had formed a warm friendship during the hottest of the Cold War years and I didn't enjoy the prospect of dismantling him, but I'd had unpleasant jobs before and I didn't intend to do half-hearted work on this one. If Karl had set himself against us he could expect no quarter; I had little sympathy to spare for him.

The first task was to find him. I couldn't employ Pete's people for the legwork because I didn't know which of them might have been compromised; there were too many rotten apples in that barrel. So I had to use Rice's authority to call in security people from Kyoto and various floating departments. The hunt fanned out across East Asia and the Malay Archipelago; I directed the operation from our communications center at Guam.

Gradually reports began to drift in from Mindanao, Tokyo, Rangoon, Macao, Singapore—Karl was careful, but he had left a spoor here and there, partly because he'd gone a bit rusty from disuse but mainly because he probably felt no one would have reason to be looking for him. It was only on a hunch that I'd been able to connect the defections with him.

It appeared he was all over the map; we kept finding his trail twelve or 24 hours too late.

During that week Pete Morgan found that the rot had spread to four more agents. He had no choice but to spread the dictum throughout his network that all agents in the system were under suspicion and surveillance until further notice.

Whether the threat succeeded was not immediately clear, but defections appeared to be on the decrease: either the agents were impressed or Karl was laying off, or perhaps his job was concluded. I suspected the latter because none of Pete's agents came forward after the middle of that week to report attempts to bribe them.

By then we had lost 17 agents—about 20 percent of the station's complement—and this made the issue so grave that Rice personally

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flew out to Guam to light a fire under me.

I gave him a cool welcome. Rice has no head for tactics. He was not going to be of any material help and I didn't want him underfoot.

He favored me with his most menacing smile. "I'm not interested in your preferences, Charlie. I want this thing wrapped and I intend to sit on you until you wrap it. I'm getting flak from stations as far away as Beirut and Marseilles and even Mexico City—a flood of trouble coming in from the Far East without any prior warning from China Station. We've got to get this network back in operation before the trouble spreads all the way into Langley."

I gave him a cold eye. "If you can do a better job than I'm doing, then I'll stand aside. Otherwise don't call me—I'll call you."

A stringer in Djakarta had his eyes open and spotted Karl Jurgens from the photo he'd memorized. The stringer phoned in from the airport and I was on the runway at Singapore with an armed crew when Karl's plane landed. We took him into custody and bundled him aboard a cabin cruiser. Out at sea I conducted the interrogation personally. No witnesses; but I had a tape deck rolling.

Karl was urbane and stoic. He managed a bleak smile. "I thought you must have retired years ago—you're even older than I am. If I'd known they would pit you against me I think I might have refused the job. I never was quite a match for you, Charlie. How did you tumble to me?"

"Legwork." I wasn't about to tell him how he'd revealed himself through his attachment to paradise. In a poker game you don't tell another player that he wiggles his ears when he's bluffing.

I said, "Who's footing the bill?"

"I've no idea."

"Don't force me to make tedious threats, Karl."

"The offer was made by telephone, just as my offers have gone to your agents by phone. I was given a list of names of agents to be subverted."

"And the visas, passports, and millions of dollars?"

"The visas and passports were sent to me at a general-delivery post-office box in Djakarta. They came in a plain carton. If it matters, it was postmarked Hong Kong. As for the millions of dollars in bribe money, it was mostly fictitious. The numbered Swiss accounts exist, but they contain only a few hundred francs each."

"Then you intended to double-cross all these people who thought you were making them rich."

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"I intended nothing, Charlie. I was paid in cash, through the mails, and I've done the job I was paid to do. I didn't ask my employer his intentions. If I had, do you suppose he'd have told me? It was only on my own initiative and from my own curiosity that I inquired into those Swiss accounts. After all, he had to give me the account numbers so that I could pass them on to the defectors."

"The Mandarin Chinese who made the phone calls for you?"

"An unemployed Formosan actor of no account. I paid him to make the calls. He read from prepared scripts. He knows nothing more than that. Forget him."

"You're telling me it's a dead end?"

He spread his hands and smiled faintly. "You have me in custody. That should solve your problem for the moment."

"Hardly. Why'd you do it?"

"Money. What else? It's hardly been stimulating to my ingenuity."

"Why did they choose you?"

"I suppose I'd let the word go out that I was available for freelance work. And I flatter myself I still have a reputation for efficiency and secrecy. I cover my tracks fairly well—I doubt any man but you could have tumbled to me. In any case I swear to you I have no knowledge of the identity of my employers."

"You weren't curious?"

"I was, but I curbed it. Does the postman care who the postmaster is? My job was simply to deliver mail and messages. Menial—beneath me, really, but the money was attractive." His smile dwindled and departed. "I'm an old man, Charlie. I take what I can get."

"Describe the voice on the phone."

"Disguised. Muffled with a handkerchief and artificial falsetto. High-pitched, nasal. A man, not a woman."

"Language?"

"German. Not a native German accent. Possibly English, American, Australian, Canadian, South African—English-speaking at any rate, but the falsetto confused things. I couldn't be specific."

"All right. What was the operation designed to cover?"

"I've no earthly idea. That's the truth. I wasn't told and I didn't ask."

"You've certainly come down in the world."

"I'm an old beggar," he agreed. "You know, oddly enough I don't think I've broken any laws. Isn't that curious? At least not to the extent that it could be proved in court against me. What do you

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intend doing about me? Is Miles Kendig still in charge of your Security Executive?"

"No. Kendig's gone. Rice runs the office."

Karl made a face. "Him. The ultimate Philistine bureaucrat. Well, what will you do with me?"

"Nothing. Go back to Tahiti and lie on the beach. You're too old."

"You're unkind but truthful."

"How much were you paid?"

"One hundred thousand marks. About forty thousand dollars. Plus expenses—I spent those. Air fares, so forth."

"Send an international money order for forty thousand dollars to the UNESCO children's fund. When you get the receipt send it to me in Langley. If I don't get it I'll come to Tahiti after you."

"What am I to live on?"

"Sorrow," I told him. "We'll send you a Care package now and then."

"You probably ought to kill me."

"I know," I said, "but I don't kill people. I never have and never will. It's one of the silly crosses I bear. *Auf Wiedersehen,* Karl."

I met Rice in Pete Morgan's office in Hong Kong. The rains were intense. The narrow passages of Kowloon ran with rancid floods. I scraped my wet shoes on Pete's carpet, tossed my voluminous dripping raincoat on a chair, and sank into the couch. "Have them send me up three or four roast-beef sandwiches."

Rice had commandeered the desk. He lit a Havana. "Do you ever stop eating?"

"It takes a lot of food to sustain all this. You wouldn't want me to faint from hunger."

"It might be good for a laugh." He squinted at Pete. "Any more defections since last week?"

"No, thank God. Things are easing back to normal. We've done some recruiting. It looks as if they—whoever they are—decided to abandon the attack rather than find a replacement for Jurgens."

Rice growled, "I don't like leaving a file wide-open. I want this one closed." He glared at me.

Pete said, "How can we close it? We haven't got any leads."

I said, "That's a matter of knowing where to look."

Pete flushed. "Look, this whole mess was my responsibility. I can't solve it but at least I can tender my resignation. It's the only thing I can do in good conscience." He dipped an envelope from his inside

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pocket and tossed it on the desk. "There's the resignation. Maybe I'll join old Jurgens in retirement on Tahiti."

His voice sounded bitter. He got up and went slowly toward the door—too slowly: he was waiting for Rice to tear up the letter of resignation. It was a bluff, meant to appear as a conscience salve.

Rice opened his mouth to stop him but I got in first. "If we refuse to accept that resignation, Pete, what will you do?"

He stopped and favored me with a sour smile. Then he shook his head. "Keep on going out the door, I guess. You've got to accept it. I blew this job. Everybody on the station knows it. Everybody in Langley will know it soon enough. How can I go on working in the Agency when everybody has good reason to ridicule me?"

"Would you accept a transfer?"

"I guess not. To tell you the truth I'm sick of the whole back-alley trade. I imagine I've been looking for an excuse to quit for a long time."

"Not to mention the wherewithal," I remarked.

"What?"

I said, "I'll accept the idea that you're sick and tired of the job. I'll accept the idea that you've wanted to get out for quite a while. But you haven't got enough time in, Pete. You're ten years too young for a retirement pension. What do you intend to use for money?"

"I'll get a job." He mustered a smile. "You can live cheap in Papeete, I hear. Maybe I'll become a beachcomber."

Rice stubbed his cigar out. The room reeked of its noxious fumes.

I said, "Pete, sit down."

He didn't move; he only shifted his feet and his bewildered gaze fled toward Rice, who said to me, "What's on your mind, Charlie?"

I said, "Not long ago we lost our station chief in Moscow, remember? We caught him selling secrets to the Comrades. The turnover in section chiefs is always pretty high, especially in the thankless and unglamorous stations like this one. Grueling work load, indifferent pay, not much patriotism left to bolster a man after the Bay of Pigs, and all the assassination attempts and Vietnam and Watergate. It's turned into a me-first world, hasn't it? People see cynicism and corruption and greed all around them—they decide it just doesn't matter any more, there aren't any good sides or bad sides, the only thing to do is make sure you get your own piece of the action. We've seen it right here on this case with poor old Karl Jurgens. Twenty years ago it never would have entered his mind

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to betray his friends. But times have changed. Nothing's sacred any more. You agree, Pete?"

Pete exhaled a gust of air. "Yeah, Charlie, I guess I do."

I said to Rice, "One of the chief functions of this station is to keep tabs on shipments of opium coming out of China and the Indochinese montagnard country. Since we shut down the Saigon station that's been one of the main preoccupations of Pete's section."

Rice said drily, "Is this supposed to come as news to me?"

"It might have rung a bell with you—it did with me—when you mentioned you'd been getting complaints about the lack of East Asian forewarnings in Beirut and Marseilles and Mexico City. That's one of the principal routes for the heroin traffic into the States."

Rice sat up.

I said, "Suddenly a senseless caper knocks off agents on this station—which just happens to have the effect of drying up drug-shipment information all along the route to America, thereby opening up that route to God knows how much heroin traffic—maybe enough to stockpile the dealer honchos with enough drugs to last a year on the street. Is that a coincidence, Pete?"

Pete had nothing to say.

I went back to Rice. "I don't know how much the opium people paid him to sabotage his own station. It must have been a hell of a lot of money—enough to finance his early retirement in style. In any case he was able to pay Jurgens out of it, forty thousand dollars, and set up several Swiss accounts, one of which probably is his own and contains the bulk of the money. Maybe he got half a million, maybe as much as a million. They can afford it. The heroin people deal in eight-figure sums."

Rice said, "Let me get this straight, Charlie. Are you accusing Pete of blowing his own network?"

"With regret, yes."

Pete said, "I deny that."

"Naturally," I said. "The voice that hired Jurgens over the phone spoke German with an English-speaker's accent. Jurgens said it could have been an American."

"Proving nothing," Pete said.

"I agree. But neither does it rule you out."

"So?"

I said, "Jurgens was given a list of names of agents to be taken out. Those were the agents whose areas included the routes of the major drug shipments—Hong Kong, Taipei, Djakarta, Singapore,

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and on toward the Middle East and France and Mexico. As chief-of-station you were the only executive with that information at your fingertips—the names and covers of all those agents. It couldn't have been anybody else, Pete. You doubled your own agents."

I turned to Rice. "He wanted out. Maybe he can't be blamed for that. But he had to get rich first."

Pete said, "I deny it. It's ridiculous!"

Rice lit another Havana. "In that case you may as well go, Pete. I expect we're finished with you for the moment." He picked up Pete's letter of resignation and put it into his pocket. "Now that we know what to look for we'll be able to put men on it. I wouldn't try to withdraw any money from Switzerland if I were you. Sooner or later we'll find evidence against you and then we'll come after you."

"Even if you have to manufacture fake evidence."

Rice snarled. "What do you think this is? A game of croquet? You're all finished, Pete—accept it."

After Pete left the office I ate my sandwiches. Rice glowered through his cigar smoke at the dreary rain outside the windows. "He won't do anything dramatic, will he? Like kill himself?"

"No," I said. "Pete's a survivor. He'll run as long as he can."

"Do you want to chase him?"

"Give that job to somebody else. I want to get out where the air's cleaner."

"All right." Rice certainly is mellowing. "Anyway, I've got a job for you in Kenya . . ."

"Q"

SPY FRY

by PAT BABÉ

When the Agency's prospects are dire,
Mr. Rice is not one to retire.
If the job is covert
He's the one they alert
To put Charlie Dark's fat in the fire.

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a *NEW* Inspector Wexford novelet by

RUTH RENDELL

The gossips on Castle Road were whispering nasty insinuations about the death of Mrs. Ivy Wrangton, who was ninety-two years old. But it seemed that the old lady died of perfectly natural causes—ninety-two, after all!—and besides, there was just no motive that Inspector Wexford could put his finger on . . .

CLUTCHING AT STRAWS

by RUTH RENDELL

They looked shocked and affronted and somehow ashamed. Above all, they looked old. Chief Inspector Wexford thought that in the nature of things a woman of 70 ought to be an orphan, ought to have been an orphan for 20 years. This one had been an orphan for scarcely 20 days. Her husband, sitting opposite her, pulling his wispy mustache, slowly and mechanically shaking his head, seemed older than she, perhaps not so many years the junior of his late mother-in-law. He wore a brown cardigan with a small neat darn at one elbow and sheepskin slippers, and when he spoke he snuffled. His wife kept saying she couldn't believe her ears, she couldn't believe it, why were people so wicked? Wexford didn't answer that. He couldn't, though he had often wondered himself.

"My mother died of a stroke," Mrs. Betts said tremulously. "It was on the death certificate, Dr. Moss put it on the death certificate."

Betts snuffled and wheezed. He reminded Wexford of an aged rabbit, a rabbit with myxomatosis perhaps. It was partly the effect of the brown woolly cardigan and the furry slippers, and partly the mustache and the unshaven bristly chin. "She was ninety-two," Betts said in his thick catarrhal voice. "*Ninety-two.* I reckon you lot must have got bats in the belfry."

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"I mean," said Mrs. Betts, "are you saying Dr. Moss was telling an untruth? A doctor?"

"Why don't you ask him? We're only ordinary people, the wife and me, we're not educated. Doctor said a cerebral haemorrhage"—Betts stumbled a little over the words—"and in plain language that's a stroke. That's what he said. Are you saying me or the wife gave Mother a stroke? Are you saying that?"

"I'm making no allegations, Mr. Betts." Wexford felt uncomfortable, wished himself anywhere but in this newly decorated, paint-smartened house. "I am merely making inquiries which information received obliges me to do."

"Gossip," said Mrs. Betts bitterly. "This street's a hotbed of gossip. Pity they've nothing better to do. Oh, I know what they're saying. Half of them turn up their noses and look the other way when I pass them. All except Elsie Parrish, and that goes without saying."

"She's been a brick," said her husband. "A real brick is Elsie." He stared at Wexford with a kind of timid outrage. "Haven't you folk got nothing better to do than listen to a bunch of old hens? What about the real crime? What about the muggings and the break-ins?"

Wexford sighed. But he went on doggedly questioning, remembering what the nurse had said, what Dr. Moss had said, keeping in the forefront of his mind that motive which was so much more than merely wanting an aged parent out of the way. If he hadn't been a policeman with a profound respect for the law and for human life, he might have felt that these two, or one of them, had been provoked beyond bearing to do murder.

One of them? Or both? Or neither? Ivy Wrangton had either died an unnatural death or else there had been a series of coincidences and unexplained contingencies which were nothing short of incredible.

It was the nurse who had started it, coming to him three days before. Sergeant Martin brought her to him because what she alleged was so serious. Chief Inspector Wexford knew her by sight, had seen her making her calls, and had sometimes wondered how district nurses could endure their jobs, the unremitting daily toil, the poor pay, the unsavory tasks. Perhaps she felt the same about his. She was a fair pretty woman, about 35, overweight, with big red hands, who always looked tired. She looked tired now, though she hadn't long been back from two weeks' holiday. She was in her summer uniform, blue and white print dress, white apron, dark

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cardigan, small round hat, and the stout shoes that served for summer and winter alike. Nurse Radcliffe. Judith Radcliffe.

"Mr. Wexford?" she said. "Chief Inspector Wexford? Yes. I believe I used to look in on your daughter after she'd had a baby. I was doing my midwifery then. I can't remember her name but the baby's was Benjamin."

Wexford smiled and told her his daughter's name and wondered, looking at the bland faded blue eyes and the stolid set of the neck and shoulders, just how intelligent this woman was, how perceptive and how truthful. He pulled up one of the little yellow chairs for her. His office was cheerful and sunny-looking even when the sun wasn't shining, not much like a police station.

"Please sit down, Nurse Radcliffe," he said. "Sergeant Martin's given me some idea what you've come about."

"I feel rather awful. You may think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill."

"I shouldn't worry about that. If I do I'll tell you so and we'll forget it. No one else will know of it, it'll be between us and these four walls."

At that she gave a short laugh. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid it's gone *much* further than that already. I've three patients in Castle Road and each one of them mentioned it to me. That's what Castle Road gossip is at the moment, poor old Mrs. Wrangton's death. And I just thought—well, you can't have that much smoke without fire, can you?"

Mountains and molehills, Wexford thought, smoke and fire. This promised to be a real volcano. He said firmly, "I think you'd better tell me all about it."

She was rather pathetic. "It's best you hear it from someone *professional*." She planted her feet rather wide apart in front of her and leaned forward, her hands on her knees. "Mrs. Wrangton was a very old woman. She was ninety-two. But allowing for her age, she was as fit as a fiddle, thin, strong, her heart as sound as a bell. The day she died was the day I went away on holiday, but I was in there the day before to give her her bath—I did that once a week, she couldn't get in and out of the bath on her own—and I remember thinking she was fitter than I'd seen her for months. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I came back from holiday and heard she'd had a stroke the next day."

"When did you come back, Nurse Radcliffe?"

"Last Friday, Friday the sixteenth. Well, it's Thursday now and

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I was back on my district on Monday and the first thing I heard was that Mrs. Wrangton was dead and suggestions she'd been—well, helped on her way." She paused, worked something out on her fingers. "I went away June second, that was the day she died, and the funeral was June seventh."

"Funeral?"

"Well, cremation," said Nurse Radcliffe, glancing up as Wexford faintly sighed. "Dr. Moss attended Mrs. Wrangton. She was really Dr. Crocker's patient, but he was on holiday too like me. Look, Mr. Wexford, I don't know the details of what happened that day, June second, not first-hand, only what the Castle Road ladies say. D'you want to hear that?"

"You haven't yet told me what she died of."

"A stroke—according to Dr. Moss."

"I'm not at all sure," said Wexford dryly, "how one sets about giving someone a stroke. Would you give them a bad fright or push an empty hypodermic into them or get them into a rage or what?"

"I really don't know." Nurse Radcliffe looked a little put out and as if she would like to say, had she dared, that to find this out was Wexford's job, not hers. She veered away from the actual death. "Mrs. Wrangton and her daughter—that's Mrs. Betts, Mrs. Doreen Betts—they hated each other, they were like cat and dog. And I don't think Mr. Betts had spoken to Mrs. Wrangton for a year or more. Considering the house was Mrs. Wrangton's and every stick of furniture in it belonged to her, I used to think they were very ungrateful. I never liked the way Mrs. Betts spoke about her mother, let alone the way she spoke *to* her, but I couldn't say a word. Mr. Betts is retired now but he only had a very ordinary sort of job in the Post Office and they lived rent-free in Mrs. Wrangton's home. It's a nice house, you know, late Victorian, and they built to last in those days. I used to think it badly needed doing up and it was a pity Mr. Betts couldn't get down to a bit of painting, when Mrs. Wrangton said to me she was having decorators in, having the whole house done up inside and out—"

Wexford cut short the flow of what seemed like irrelevancies. "Why were the Bettses and Mrs. Wrangton on such bad terms?"

The look he got implied that seldom had Nurse Radcliffe come across such depths of naivety. "It's a sad fact, Mr. Wexford, that people can outstay their welcome in this world. To put it bluntly, Mr. and Mrs. Betts couldn't wait for something to happen to Mrs. Wrangton." Her voice lingered over the euphemism. "They hadn't

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been married all that long, you know," she said surprisingly. "Only five or six years. Mrs. Betts was just a spinster before that, living at home with mother. Mr. Betts was a widower that she met at the Over Sixties Club. Mrs. Wrangton used to say she could have done better for herself—seems funny to say that about a woman of her age, doesn't it?—and that Mr. Betts was only after the house and her money."

"You mean she said it to you?"

"Well, not just to me, to anybody," said Nurse Radcliffe, unconsciously blackening the dead woman to whom she showed such conscious bias. "She really felt it. I think she bitterly resented having him in the house."

Wexford moved a little impatiently in his chair. "If we were to investigate every death just because the victim happened to be on bad terms with his or her relations—"

"Oh, no, no, it's not just that, not at all. Mrs. Betts sent for Dr. Moss on May twenty-third, just four days after Dr. Crocker went away. Why did she? There wasn't anything wrong with Mrs. Wrangton. I was getting her dressed after her bath and I was amazed to see Dr. Moss. Mrs. Wrangton said, I don't know what you're doing here, I never asked my daughter to send for you. Just because I overslept a bit this morning, she said. She was so proud of her good health, poor dear, never had an illness in her long life but the once and that was more an allergy than an illness.

"I can tell you why he was sent for Mr. Wexford. So that *when Mrs. Wrangton died* he'd be within his rights signing the death certificate. He wasn't her doctor, you see, but it'd be all right if he'd attended her within the past two weeks, that's the law. They're all saying Mrs. Betts waited for Dr. Crocker to go away, she knew he'd never have accepted her mother's death like that. He'd have asked for a post-mortem and then the fat would have been in the fire."

Nurse Radcliffe didn't specify how, and Wexford thought better of interrupting her again. "The last time I saw Mrs. Wrangton," she went on, "was on June first. I had a word with the painter as I was going out. There were two of them but this was a young boy, about twenty. I asked him when they expected to finish, and he said, sooner than they thought, next week, because Mrs. Betts had told them just to finish the kitchen and the outside and then to leave it. I thought it was funny at the time, Mrs. Wrangton hadn't said a word to me about it. In fact, what she'd said was, wouldn't it be nice when the bathroom walls were all tiled and I wouldn't have to worry

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about splashing when I bathed her.

"Mr. Wexford, it's possible Mrs. Betts stopped that work because she knew her mother was going to die the next day. She personally didn't want the whole house re-decorated and she didn't want to have to pay for it out of the money her mother left her."

"Was there much money?" Wexford asked.

"I'd guess a few thousands in the bank, maybe three or four, and there was the house, wasn't there? I know she'd made a will, I witnessed it. I and Dr. Crocker. In the presence," said Nurse Radcliffe sententiously, "of the legatee and of each other, which is the law. But naturally I didn't see what its *provisions* were. Mrs. Wrangton did tell me the house was to go to Mrs. Betts and there was a little something for her friend Elsie Parrish. Beyond that, I couldn't tell you. Mind you, Mrs. Parrish won't have it that there could have been foul play. I met her in Castle Road and she said, wasn't it wicked the things people were saying?"

"Who is Elsie Parrish?"

"A very nice old friend of Mrs. Wrangton's. Nearly eighty but as spry as a cricket. And that brings me to the worst thing. June second, that Friday afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Betts went off to a whist drive. Mrs. Parrish knew they were going. Mrs. Betts had promised to knock on her door before they went so that she could come round and sit with Mrs. Wrangton. She sometimes did that. It wasn't right to leave her alone, not at her age. Well, Mrs. Parrish waited in and Mrs. Betts never came, so naturally she thought the Bettses had changed their minds and hadn't gone out. But they had. They deliberately didn't call to fetch Mrs. Parrish. They left Mrs. Wrangton all alone but for that young boy painter, and they'd never done such a thing before, not once."

Wexford digested all this in silence, not liking it but not really seeing it as a possible murder case. Nurse Radcliffe seemed to have dried up. She slackened back in the chair with a sigh.

"You mentioned an allergy?"

"Oh, my goodness, that was about fifty years ago! Only some kind of hayfever, I think. There's asthma in the family. Mrs. Betts's brother had asthma all his life, and Mrs. Betts gets urticaria—nettle rash, that is. They're all connected, you know."

He nodded. He had the impression she had a bombshell yet to explode, or that the volcano was about to erupt. "If they weren't there," he said, "how could either of them possibly have hastened Mrs. Wrangton's end?"

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"They'd been back two hours before she died. When they came back she was in a coma, and they waited *one hour and twenty minutes* before they phoned Dr. Moss."

"Would you have signed that death certificate, Len?" said Wexford to Dr. Crocker. They were in the bungalow that housed two consulting rooms and a waiting room. Dr. Crocker's evening surgery was over, the last patient packed off with reassurance and a prescription. Crocker gave Wexford rather a defiant look.

"Of course I would. Why not? Mrs. Wrangton was ninety-two. It's ridiculous of Radcliffe to say she didn't expect her to die. You expect everyone of ninety-two to die and pretty soon. I hope nobody's casting any aspersions on my extremely able partner."

"I'm not," said Wexford. "There's nothing I'd like more than for this to turn out a lot of hot air. But I do have to ask you, don't I? I do have to ask Jim Moss."

Dr. Crocker looked a little mollified. He and the Chief Inspector were lifelong friends, they had been at school together, had lived most of their lives in Kingsmarkham where Crocker had his practice, and Wexford was head of the C.I.D. But for a medical practitioner, no amount of friendship will excuse hints that he or one of his fellows have been negligent. And he prickled up again when Wexford said, "How could he *know* it was a stroke without a post-mortem?"

"God give me patience! He saw her before she was dead, didn't he? He got there about half an hour before she died. There are unmistakable signs of stroke, Reg. An experienced medical man couldn't fail to recognize them. The patient is unconscious, the face flushed, the pulse slow, the breathing stertorous with a puffing of the cheeks during expiration. The only possible confusion is with narcotic poisoning, but in narcotic poisoning the pupils of the eyes are widely dilated whereas in apoplexy or stroke they're contracted. Does that satisfy you?"

"Well, okay, it was a stroke, but aren't I right in thinking a stroke can be the consequence of something else—of an operation, for instance, or in the case of a young woman, of childbirth, or in an old person even of bedsores?"

"Old Ivy Wrangton didn't have bedsores and she hadn't had a baby for seventy years. She had a stroke because she was ninety-two and her arteries were worn out. The days of our age," quoted the doctor solemnly, "are threescore years and ten, and though men

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be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength then but labor and sorrow. She'd reached fourscore years and twelve and she was worn out."

Dr. Crocker had been pacing up and down, getting heated, but now came to sit on the edge of his desk, a favorite perch of his. "A damn good thing she was cremated," he said. "That puts out of court all the ghastliness of exhumation and cutting her up. She was a remarkable old woman, you know, Reg. Tough as old boots. She told me once about having her first baby. She was eighteen, out scrubbing the doorstep when she had a labor pain. Indoors she went, called her mother to fetch the midwife, and lay down on her bed. The baby was born after two more pains, and the daughter came even easier."

"Yes, I heard there's been another child." Wexford saw the absurdity of referring to someone who must necessarily be in his seventies as a child.

"Mrs. Betts has a brother?" he corrected himself.

"*Had.* He died last winter. He was an old man, Reg, and he'd been bronchial all his life. Seventy-four *is* old till you start comparing it with Mrs. Wrangton's age. She was so proud of her good health, boasted about never being ill. I used to drop in every three months or so as a matter of routine, and when I'd ask her how she was she'd say, I'm fine, Doctor, I'm in the pink."

"But I understand she'd had some illness connected with an allergy?" Wexford was clutching at straws. "Nurse Radcliffe told me about it. I've been wondering if anything to do with that could have contributed to—?"

"Of course not," the doctor cut in. "How could it? That was when she was middle-aged and the so-called illness was an asthmatic attack with some swelling of the eyes and a bit of gastric trouble. I fancy she used to exaggerate it the way healthy people do when they're talking about the one little bit of illness they've ever had . . . Oh, here's Jim. I thought I'd heard his last patient leave."

Dr. Moss, small, dark, and trim, came in from the corridor between the counsulting rooms. He gave Wexford the very wide smile that showed 32 large white teeth which the Chief Inspector had never been able precisely to define as false, as crowns, or simply as his own. The teeth were rather too big for Dr. Moss's face which was small and smooth and lightly tanned. His small black eyes didn't smile at all.

"Enter the villainous medico," he said, "who is notoriously in

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cahoots with greedy legatees and paranoid Post Office clerks. What evidence can I show you? The number of my Swiss bank account? Or shall I produce the hammer, a crafty tap from which insured an immediate subarachnoid haemorrhage?"

It is very difficult to counter this kind of facetiousness. Wexford knew he would only get more fatuous pleasantries, heavy irony, outrageous confessions, if he attempted to rebut any of it or if he were to assure Moss that this wasn't what he had meant at all. He smiled stiffly, tapping his foot against the leg of Crocker's desk, while Dr. Moss elaborated on his fantasy of himself as corrupt, a kind of latter day William Palmer, poison bottle-happy and ever-ready with his hypodermic to gratify the impatient next-of-kin.

At length, unable to bear any more of it, Wexford cut across the seemingly interminable harangue and said to Crocker, "You witnessed her will, I understand?"

"I and that busybody Radcliffe, that's right. If you want to know what's in it, the house and three thousand pounds go to Doreen Betts, and the residue to another patient of mine, a Mrs. Parrish. Residue would have been about fifteen hundred at that time, Mrs. Wrangton told me, but considering her money was in a building society and she managed to save out of her pension and her annuity, I imagine it'll be a good deal more by now."

Wexford nodded. By now Dr. Moss had dried up, having run out, presumably, of subject matter and witticisms. His teeth radiated his face like lamps, and when his mouth was closed he looked rather ill-tempered and sinister. Wexford decided to try the direct and simple approach. He apologized.

"I'd no intention of suggesting you'd been negligent, Dr. Moss. But put yourself in my position—"

"Impossible!"

"Very well. Let me put it this way. Try to understand that in my position I had no choice but to make inquiries."

"Mrs. Betts might try an action for slander. She can count on my support. The Bettses had neither the opportunity nor the motive to do violence to Mrs. Wrangton, but a bunch of tongue-clacking old witches are allowed to take their characters away just the same."

"Motive," said Wexford gently, "I'm afraid they did have, the straightforward one of getting rid of Mrs. Wrangton who had become an encumbrance to them, and of inheriting her house."

"Nonsense." Momentarily the teeth showed in a white blaze. "They were going to get rid of her in any case. They would have had the

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house to themselves in any case. Mrs. Wrangton was going into a nursing home." He paused, enjoying the effect of what he had said. "For the rest of her days," he added with a touch of drama.

Dr. Crocker shifted off the edge of the desk. "I never knew that."

"No? Well, it was you told her about a new nursing home opening in Stowerton, or so she said. She told me all about it that day Mrs. Betts called me when you'd gone away. Sometime at the end of May, it was. She was having the house decorated for her daughter and son-in-law prior to her leaving."

"Did she tell you that too?" asked Wexford.

"No, but it was obvious. I can tell you exactly what happened during that visit if it makes you happy. That interfering harpy, Radcliffe, had just been bathing her, and when she'd dressed her she left. Thank God. I'd never met Mrs. Wrangton before. There was nothing wrong with her, bar extreme old age and her blood pressure up a bit, and I was rather narked that Mrs. Betts had called me out. Mrs. Wrangton said her daughter got nervous when she slept late in the mornings as she'd done that day and the day before. Wasn't to be wondered at, she said, considering she'd been sitting up in bed watching the World Cup on television till all hours. Only Mrs. Betts and her husband didn't know that and I wasn't to tell them. Well, we had a conspiratorial laugh over that, I liked her, she was a game old dear, and then she started talking about the nursing home—what's it called? Springfield? Sunnyside?"

"Summerland," said Dr. Crocker.

"Cost you a lot, that will, I said, and she said she'd got a good bit coming in which would die with her anyway. I assumed she meant an annuity. We talked for about five minutes and I got the impression she'd been tossing around this nursing home idea for months. I asked her what her daughter thought and she said . . ."

"Yes?" prompted Wexford.

"Oh, my God, people like you make one see sinister nuances in the most innocent remarks. It's just that she said, 'You'd reckon Doreen'd be only too glad to see the back of me, wouldn't you?' I mean, it rather implied she wouldn't be glad. I don't know what she was inferring and I didn't ask. But you can rest assured Mrs. Betts had no motive for killing her mother. Leaving sentiment apart, it was all the same to her whether her mother were alive or dead. The Bettses would still have got the house and after her death Mrs. Wrangton's capital. The next time I saw her she was unconscious, she was dying. She did die, at seven thirty, on June second."

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Both Wexford's parents had died before he was 40. His wife's mother had been dead 20 years, her father 15. None of these people had been beyond their seventies, so therefore Wexford had no personal experience of the geriatric problem. It seemed to him that for a woman like Mrs. Wrangton, to end one's days in a nursing home with companionship and good nursing and in pleasant surroundings was not so bad a fate. And an obvious blessing to the daughter and son-in-law whose affection for a parent might be renewed when they only encountered her for an hour or so a week.

No, Doreen Betts and her husband had no motive for helping Mrs. Wrangton out of this world, for by retiring to Summerland she wouldn't even make inroads into that three or four thousand pounds of capital. Her pension and her annuity would cover the fees. Wexford wondered what those fees would be, and remembered vaguely from a few years back hearing a figure of £20 a week mentioned in a similar connection. Somebody's old aunt, some friend of his wife's. You'd have to allow for inflation, of course, but surely it would cost no more than £30 a week now. With the Retirement Pension at £18 and the annuity worth, say, another £20, Mrs. Wrangton could amply have afforded Summerland.

But she had died first—of natural causes. It no longer mattered that she and Harry Betts hadn't been on speaking terms, that no one had fetched Elsie Parrish, that Dr. Moss had been called out to visit a healthy woman, that Mrs. Betts had given orders to stop the painting. There was no motive. Eventually the tongues would cease to wag, Mrs. Wrangton's will would be proved, and the Bettses settle down to enjoy the rest of their lives in their newly decorated home.

Wexford put it out of his head, apart from wondering whether he should visit Castle Road and drop a word of warning to the gossips. Immediately he saw how impossible this would be. The slander would be denied, and besides he hardly saw his function as extending so far. No, let it die a natural death—as Mrs. Wrangton had.

On Monday morning he was having breakfast, his wife reading a letter just arrived from her sister in Wales.

"Frances says Bill's mother has got to go into a nursing home at last." Bill was Wexford's brother-in-law. "It's either that or Fran having her, which really isn't on."

Wexford, from behind his newspaper, made noises indicative of sympathy with and support for Frances. He was reading a verbatim report of the trial of some bank robbers.

"Ninety pounds a week," said Dora.

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"What did you say?"

"I was talking to myself, dear. You read your paper."

"Did you say ninety pounds a week?"

"That's right. For the nursing home. I shouldn't think Bill and Fran could stand that for long. It's getting on for five thousand a year."

"But . . ." Wexford almost stammered, "I thought a couple of years ago you said it was twenty a week for what's-her-name, Rosemary's aunt, wherever they put her?"

"Darling," said Dora gently, "first of all, that wasn't a couple of years ago, it was at least *twelve* years ago. And secondly, haven't you ever heard of the rising cost of living?"

An hour later he was in the matron's office at Summerland, having made no attempt to disguise who he was, but presenting himself as there to inquire about a prospective home for an aged relative of his wife's. Aunt Lillian. Such a woman had actually existed, perhaps still did exist in the remote Westmorland village from which the Wexfords had last heard of her in a letter dated 1959.

The matron was an Irishwoman, Mrs. Corrigan. She seemed about the same age as Nurse Radcliffe. At her knee stood a boy of perhaps six, and at her feet, playing with a toy tractor, was another of three. Outside the window three little girls were trying to coax a black cat from its refuge under a car. You might have thought this was a children's home but for the presence of half a dozen old women sitting on the lawn in a half circle, dozing, muttering to themselves, or just staring. The grounds were full of flowers, mauve and white lilac everywhere, roses coming out. From behind a hedge came the sound of a lawn mower, plied perhaps by the philoprogenitive Mr. Corrigan.

"Our fees are ninety-*five* pounds a week, Mr. Wexford," said the matron. "And with the extra for laundry and dry-cleaning, sure and you might say five thousand a year for a good round figure."

"I see."

"The ladies only have to share a room with one other lady. We bathe them once a week and change their clothes once a week. And if you could please see to it your aunt only had synthetic fabrics, if you know what I mean, for the lot's popped in the washing machine all together. We like the fees a month in advance and paid on a banker's order, if you please."

"I'm afraid I don't please," said Wexford. "Your charges are more than I expected. I shall have to make other arrangements."

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"Then there's no more to be said," said Mrs. Corrigan with a smile nearly equaling the candlepower of Dr. Moss's.

"Just out of curiosity, Mrs. Corrigan, how do your—er, guests meet your fees? Five thousand a year is more than most incomes would be equal to."

"Sure and aren't they widows, Mr. Wexford, and didn't their husbands leave them their houses? Mostly the ladies sell their houses, and with prices the way they are today that's enough to keep them in Summerland for four years or five."

Mrs. Wrangton had intended to sell her house, and she was having it re-decorated inside and out in order to get a better price. She had intended to sell the roof over the Bettses' heads—no wonder she had implied to Dr. Moss that Doreen Betts would be sorry to see the back of her. What a woman! What malevolence at 92! And who could have said she wouldn't have been within her moral as well as her legal rights to sell? It was her house. Doreen Wrangton might long ago have found a home of her own, ought perhaps to have done so, and as Doreen Betts she might have expected her husband to provide one for her. It is universally admitted to be wrong to anticipate stepping into dead men's shoes. And yet what a monstrous revenge to have on an uncongenial son-in-law, a not always cooperative daughter. There was a subtlety about it that evoked Wexford's admiration nearly as much as its cruelty aroused his disgust. It was a motive all right, and a strong one.

So at last he had found himself in Castle Road, in the Bettses' living room, confronting an elderly orphan and her husband. The room was papered in a silvery oyster color, the woodwork ivory. He was sure that that door had never previously sported a shade lighter than chocolate brown, just as the hall walls had, until their recent coat of magnolia, been gloomily clothed in dark Lincrusta.

When the two of them had protested bitterly about the gossip and the apparent inability of the police to get their priorities right, Doreen Betts agreed without too much mutiny to answer Wexford's questions. To the first one she reacted passionately.

"Mother would never have done it. I know she wouldn't, it was all bluff with her. Even Mother wouldn't have been that cruel."

Her husband pulled his mustache, slowly shuffling his slippered feet back and forth. His angry excitement had resulted in a drop of water appearing on the end of his nose. It hung there, trembling.

Doreen Betts said, "I knew she didn't mean to go ahead with it

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when I said, 'Can I tell the builders to leave the upstairs?' And she said, 'I daresay.' That's what she said, 'I daresay,' she said, 'I'm not bothered either way.' Of course she wouldn't have gone ahead with it. You don't even get a room to yourself in that place. Ninety-five pounds a week! They'll put you to bed at eight o'clock, Mother, I said, so don't think they'll let you sit up till all hours watching TV."

"Quite right," said Harry Betts ambiguously.

"Why, if we'd known Mother meant to do a thing like that, we could have lived in Harry's flat when we got married. He had a nice little flat over the freezer center in the High Street. It wasn't just one room like Mother went about saying, it was a proper flat, wasn't it, Harry? What would we have done if Mother had done a thing like that? We'd have had nowhere." Her husband's head-shaking, the trembling droplet, the fidgety feet, seemed suddenly to unnerve her. She said to him, distress in her voice, "I'm going to have a little talk to the officer on my own, dear."

Wexford followed her into the room where Mrs. Wrangton had slept for the last years of her life. It was on the ground floor at the back, presumably originally designated as a dining room, with a pair of windows looking out onto a narrow concrete terrace and a very long, very narrow garden. No re-decorations had been carried out here. The walls were papered in a pattern of faded nasturtiums, the woodwork grained to look like walnut. Mrs. Wrangton's double bed was still there, the mattress uncovered, a pile of folded blankets on top of it. There was a television set in this room as well as in the front room, and it had been placed so that the occupant of the bed could watch it.

"Mother came to sleep down here a few years back," said Mrs. Betts. "There's a toilet just down the passage. She couldn't manage the stairs any more except when nurse helped her." She sat on the edge of the mattress, nervously fingering a cage-like object of metal bars. "I'll have to see about her walking frame going back, I'll have to get on to the welfare people." Her hands resting on it, she said dolefully, "Mother hated Harry. She always said he wasn't good enough for me. She did everything she could to stop me marrying him." Mrs. Betts's voice took on a rebellious girlish note. "I think it's awful having to ask your mother's consent to marry when you're sixty-five, don't you?"

At any rate, he thought, she had gone ahead without receiving it. He looked wonderingly at this gray wisp of a woman, 70 years old, who talked as if she were a fairy princess.

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"You see, she talked for years of changing her will and leaving the house to my brother. It was after he died that the nursing-home business started. She quarreled outright with Harry. Elsie Parrish was in here and Mother accused Harry in front of her of only marrying me to get this place. Harry never spoke a word to Mother again, and quite right too. I said to Mother, 'You're a wicked woman, you promised me years ago I'd have this house and now you're going back on your word. Cheats never prosper,' I said."

The daughter had inherited the mother's tongue. Wexford could imagine the altercations, overheard by visitors, by neighbors, which had contributed to the gossip. He turned to look at the framed photograph on a mahogany tallboy. A wedding picture, *circa* 1903. The bride was seated, lilies in her lap under a bolster of a bosom hung with lace and pearls. The bridegroom stood behind her, frock coat, black handlebar mustache. Ivy Wrangton must have been 17, Wexford calculated, her face plain, puffy, young, her figure modishly pouter pigeon-like, her hair in that most unflattering of fashions, the cottage loaf. She had been rather plump then, but thin, according to Nurse Radcliffe, in old age.

Wexford said quietly, apparently idly, "Mrs. Betts, why did you send for Dr. Moss on May twenty-third? Your mother wasn't ill. She hadn't complained of feeling ill."

She held the walking frame, pushing it backward and forward. "Why shouldn't I? Dr. Crocker was away. Elsie came in at nine and Mother was still asleep, and Elsie said it wasn't right the amount she slept. We couldn't wake her, though we shook her, we were so worried. I wasn't to know she'd get up as fit as a flea ten minutes after I'd phoned for him, was I?"

"Tell me about the day your mother died, Mrs. Betts, Friday, June second," he said, and it occurred to him that no one had yet told him anything much about that day.

"Well . . ." Her mouth trembled and she said quickly, "You don't think Harry did anything to Mother, do you? He wouldn't, I swear he wouldn't."

"Tell me about that Friday."

She made an effort to control herself, clenching her hands on the metal bar. "We wanted to go to a whist drive. Elsie came round in the morning and I said, If we went out would she sit with Mother, and she said, okay, of course she would if I'd just give her a knock before we left." Mrs. Betts sighed and her voice steadied. "Elsie lives two doors down. She and Mother had been pals for years and

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she always came to sit with her when we went out. Though it's a lie"—her old eyes flashed like young ones—"to say we were always out. Once in a blue moon we went out."

Wexford's eyes went from the pudding-faced girl in the photograph, her mouth smug and proud even then, to the long strip of turfed-over garden—why did he feel Betts had done that turfing, had uprooted flowers?—and back to the nervous little woman on the mattress edge.

"I gave Mother her lunch and she was sitting in the front room, doing a bit of knitting. I popped down to Elsie's and rang her bell but she can't have heard it, she didn't come to the door. I rang and rang and I thought, well, she's gone out, she's forgotten and that's that. But Harry said, Why not go out just the same? The painter was there, he was only a bit of a boy, twenty, twenty-two, but he and Mother got on a treat, a sight better than she and I ever did, I can tell you. So the upshot was, we went off and left her here with the painter—what was he called? Ray? Rafe? No, Roy, that was it, Roy—with Roy doing the hall walls. She was okay, fit as a flea. It was a nice day, so I left all the windows open because that paint did smell. I'll never forget the way she spoke to me before I left. That was the last thing she ever said to me. 'Doreen,' she said, 'you ought to be lucky at cards. You haven't been very lucky in love.' And she laughed and I'll swear Roy was laughing too."

You're building an edifice of motives for yourself, Mrs. Betts, reflected Wexford. "Go on," was all he said.

She moved directly into hearsay evidence, but Wexford didn't stop her. "Roy closed the door to keep the smell out, but he popped in a few times to see if Mother was all right. They had a bit of a chat, he said, and he offered to make her a cup of tea but she didn't want any. Then about half-past three Mother said she'd got a headache—that was the onset of the stroke but she didn't know that, she put it down to the paint—and would he fetch her a couple of her phenacetins from the bathroom. So he did and he got her a glass of water and she said she'd try and have a sleep in her chair. Anyway, the next thing he knew she was out in the hall walking with her walking frame, going to have a lay-down on her bed, she said.

"Well, Harry and me came in at five thirty and Roy was just packing up. He said Mother was asleep in her bed, and I just put my head round the door to check. She'd drawn the curtains." Mrs. Betts paused, then burst out, "To tell you the honest truth, I didn't

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look too closely. I thought, well, thank God for half an hour's peace to have a cup of tea in before she starts picking on Harry. It was just about a quarter to seven, ten to seven, before I went in again. I could tell there was something going on, the way she was breathing, sort of puffing out her cheeks, and red in the face. There was blood on her lips." She looked fearfully at Wexford, looked him in the eye for the first time. "I wiped that clean before I called the doctor, I didn't want him seeing that.

"He came straightaway. I thought maybe he'd call an ambulance but he didn't. He said she'd had a stroke and when people had strokes they shouldn't be moved. We stayed with her—well, doctor and I stayed with her—but she passed away just before half-past."

Wexford nodded. Something about what she had said was wrong. He felt it. It wasn't that she had told a lie, though she might well have done so, but something else, something that rang incongruously in that otherwise commonplace narrative, some esoteric term in place of a household word . . . He was checking back, almost there, when a footstep sounded in the hall, the door opened, and a face appeared round it.

"There you are, Doreen!" said the face, which was very pretty considering its age. "I was just on my way to—oh, I beg your pardon, I'm intruding."

"That's all right," said Mrs. Betts. "You can come in, Elsie." She looked blankly at Wexford, her eyes once more old and tired. "This is Mrs. Parrish."

Elsie Parrish, Wexford decided, looked exactly as an old lady should. She had a powdery, violet-cashew, creamy smell, which might equally well have been associated with a very clean baby. Her legs were neat and shapely in gray stockings, her hands in white gloves with tiny darns at the fingertips, her coat silky navy-blue over blue flowery pleats, and her face withered rose leaves with rouge on. The bouffant mass of silver hair was so profuse that from a distance it might have been taken for a white silk turban. She and Wexford walked down the street together toward the shops, Elsie Parrish swinging a pink nylon string bag.

"It's wicked the way they gossip. You can't understand how people can be so evil-minded. You'll notice how none of them is able to say how Doreen gave Ivy a stroke when she wasn't even there." Mrs. Parrish gave a dry satirical laugh. "Perhaps they think she bribed that poor young man, the painter, to give Ivy a fright. I remember

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my mother saying that fright could give you a stroke—an apoplexy, she called it—or too much excitement or drinking too much or overeating even."

To his surprise, because this isn't what old ladies of elegant appearance usually do or perhaps should do, she opened her handbag, took out a packet of cigarettes, and put one between her lips. He shook his head when the packet was offered to him, watched her light the cigarette with a match from a matchbook with a black shiny cover. She puffed delicately. He didn't think he had ever before seen someone smoke a cigarette while wearing white gloves.

He said, "Why didn't you go round and sit with Mrs. Wrangton, that afternoon, Mrs. Parrish?"

"The day she died, you mean?"

"Yes." Wexford had the impression she didn't want to answer, she didn't want to suggest anything against Doreen Betts. She spoke with care.

"It's quite true I'm getting rather deaf." He hadn't noticed it. She had heard everything he said, in the open noisy street, and he hadn't raised his voice. "I don't always hear the bell. Doreen must have rung and I didn't hear. That's the only explanation."

Was it?

"I thought she and Harry had changed their minds about going out." Elsie Parrish put the cigarette to her lips between thumb and forefinger. "I'd give a lot," she said, "to be able to go back in time. I wouldn't hesitate this time, I'd go round and check on Ivy whether Doreen had asked me or not."

"Probably your presence would have made no difference," he said, and then, "Mrs. Betts had told the builders not to do any work upstairs—"

She interrupted him. "Maybe it didn't need it. I've never been upstairs in Ivy's house, so I couldn't say. Besides, when she'd sold it the new people might have had their own decorating ideas, mightn't they?"

They were standing still now on the street corner, he about to go in one direction, she in the other. She dropped the cigarette end, stamped it out over-thoroughly with a high heel. From her handbag she took a small lacy handkerchief and dabbed her nostrils with it. The impression was that the tears, though near, would be restrained. "She left me two thousand pounds. Dear Ivy, she was so kind and generous. I knew I was to have something, but I didn't dream as much as that." Elsie Parrish smiled, a watery, girlish,

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rueful smile, but still he was totally unprepared for what she said next. "I'm going to buy a car."

His eyebrows went up.

"I've kept my license going. I haven't driven since my husband died and that's twenty-two years ago. I had to sell our car and I've always longed and longed for another." She really looked as if she had, a yearning expression crumpling the roses still further. "I'm going to have my own dear little car!" She was on the verge of executing a dance on the pavement. "And dear Ivy made that possible!" Anxiously: "You don't think I'm too old to drive?"

Wexford did, but he only said that this kind of judgment wasn't really within his province. She nodded, smiled again, then whisked off surprisingly fast into the corner supermarket. Wexford moved more slowly and thoughtfully away, his eyes down. It was because he was looking down that he saw the matchbook, and then he remembered fancying he had seen her drop something when she got out that handkerchief.

She wasn't in the shop. She must have left by the other exit into the High Street and now she was nowhere to be seen. Deciding that matchbooks were in the category of objects which no one much minds losing, Wexford dropped it into his pocket and forgot it.

"You want Roy?"

"That's right," said Wexford.

The foreman, storekeeper, proprietor, whatever he was, didn't ask why. "You'll find him," he said, "doing the Snowcem on them flats up the Sewingbury Road."

Wexford drove up there. Roy was a gigantic youth, broad-shouldered, heavily muscled, with an aureole of thick curly fair hair. He came down the ladder and said he'd just been about to knock off for his tea break, anyway. There was a truckers' café conveniently near. Roy lit a cigarette and put his elbows on the table.

"I never knew a thing about it till I turned up there the next day."

"But surely when Mrs. Betts came in the afternoon before, she asked you how her mother had been?"

"Sure she did. And I said the truth, that the old lady had got a headache and asked for something for it and I'd given it her, and then she'd felt tired and gone in for a lay-down. But there was no sign she was *dying*. My God, that'd never have crossed my mind."

A headache, Wexford reflected, was often one of the premonitory

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signs of a cerebral haemorrhage. Roy seemed to read his thoughts, for he said quickly, "She'd had a good many headaches while I was in the place working. Them non-drip plastic-based paints have got a bit of a smell to them, used to turn *me* up at first. I mean, you don't want to get thinking there was anything out of the way in her having an aspirin and laying down, guv. That had happened two or three times while I was there. And she'd shovel them aspirins down, swallow four as soon as look at you."

Wexford said, "Tell me about that afternoon. Did anyone come into the house between the time Mr. and Mrs. Betts went out and the time they got back?"

Roy shook his head. "Definitely not, and I'd have known. I was working on the hall, see? The front door was wide-open on account of the smell. Nobody could have come in there without me seeing, could they? The other old girl—Mrs. Betts, that is—she locked the back door before she went out and I hadn't no call to unlock it. What else d'you want to know, guv?"

"Exactly what happened, what you and Mrs. Wrangton talked about, the lot."

Roy swigged his tea, then lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of the last. "I got on okay with her, you know. I reckon she reminded me of my gran. It's a funny thing, but everyone got on okay with her bar her own daughter and the old man. Funny old git, isn't he? Gave me the creeps. Well, to what you're asking, I don't know that we talked much. I was painting, you see, and the door to the front room was shut. I looked in a couple of times. She was sitting there knitting, watching cricket on the TV. I do remember she said I was making a nice job of the house and it was a pity she wouldn't be there to enjoy it. Well, I thought she meant she'd be dead, you know the way they talk, and I said, 'Now come on, Mrs. Wrangton, you mustn't talk like that.' That made her laugh. She said, 'I don't mean that, you naughty boy, I mean I'm going into a nursing home and I've got to sell the place, didn't you know?' No, I said, I didn't, but I reckoned it'd fetch a packet, big old house like that, twenty thousand at least, I said, and she said she hoped so."

Wexford nodded. So Mrs. Wrangton had intended to go ahead with her plans, and Doreen Betts's denial had either been purposeful lying to demolish her motive or a post-mortem white-washing of her mother's character. For it had certainly been black-hearted enough, he thought, quite an act it had been, that of deliberately turning your own daughter and her husband out of their home.

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He looked back to Roy. "You offered to make her some tea?"

"Yeah, well, the daughter, Mrs. Betts, said to make myself and her a cup of tea if she wanted, but she didn't want. She asked me to turn off the TV and then she said she'd got a headache and would I go up to the bathroom cupboard and get her aspirins? Well, I'd seen Mrs. Betts do it often enough, though I'd never actually—"

"You're sure she said aspirins?" Quite suddenly Wexford knew what it was that had seemed incongruous to him in Mrs. Betts's description of her mother's last afternoon of life. Doreen Betts had specified phenacetin instead of the common household remedy. "You're sure she used that word?" he said.

Roy pursed his mouth. "Well, now you mention it, I'm not sure. I reckon what she said was, my tablets or the tablets for my head, something like that. You just do say aspirins, don't you, like naturally? I mean, that's what everybody takes. Anyway, I brought them down, the bottle, and gave them to her with a glass of water, and she says she's going to have a bit of shut-eye in her chair. But the next thing I knew she was coming out, leaning on that walking frame the welfare people give her. 'I took four, Roy,' she says, 'but my head's that bad, I reckon it's worse, and I'm ever so giddy.'

"Well, I didn't think much of that, they're all giddy at that age, aren't they? I remember my gran. She says she's got ringing in her ears, so I said, 'I'll help you into your room, shall I?' And I sort of give her my arm and helped her in and she lay down on the bed with all her things on and shut her eyes. The light was glaring, so I pulled the curtains over and then I went back to my painting. I never heard another thing till Mrs. Betts and the old boy come in at half-past five . . ."

Wexford closed *Practical Forensic Medicine* by Francis E. Camps and J. M. Cameron and made his way back to Castle Road. He had decided to discuss the matter no further with Mrs. Betts. The presence of her husband, shuffling about almost silently in his furry slippers, his feet like the paws of an old hibernating animal, rather unnerved him. She made no demur at his proposal to remove from the bathroom cabinet the prescription bottle of pain-killing tablets labeled: Mrs. I. Wrangton, Phenacetin.

Evening surgery had only just begun. Wexford went home for his dinner, having sent two items away for fingerprint analysis. By 8:30 he was back in the surgery building and again Dr. Crocker had finished first. He groaned when he saw Wexford.

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"What is it now, Reg?"

"Why did you prescribe phenacetin for Mrs. Wrangton?"

"Because I thought it suitable for her, of course. She was allergic to aspirin."

Wexford looked despairingly at his friend. "Now he tells me. I'd rather gathered that. I mean, today I caught on, but you might have told me."

"For God's sake! You *knew*. You said to me, 'Nurse Radcliffe told me all about it.' Those were your words. You said—"

"I thought it was asthma."

Crocker sat on the edge of his desk. "Look, Reg, we've both been barking up the wrong trees. There was asthma in Mrs. Wrangton's family. Mrs. Betts has nettle rash, her brother was a chronic asthmatic. People with asthma or a family history of asthma are sometimes allergic to acetylsalicylic acid or aspirin. In fact, about ten percent of such people are thought to have the allergy. One of the reactions of the hypersensitive person to aspirin is an asthmatic attack. That's what Mrs. Wrangton had when she was in her forties, that and haematemesis. Which means," he added kindly for the layman, "bringing up blood from an internal haemorrhage."

"Okay, I'm not bone-ignorant," Wexford snapped, "and I've been reading up hypersensitivity to acetylsalicylic acid—"

"Mrs. Wrangton couldn't have had aspirin poisoning," said the doctor quickly. "There were never any aspirins in the house. Mrs. Betts was strict about that."

They were interrupted by the arrival of smiling Dr. Moss. Wexford wheeled round on him.

"What would you expect to be the result of—let me see—one point two grams of acetylsalicylic acid on a woman of ninety-two who was hypersensitive to the drug?"

Moss looked at him warily. "I take it this is academic?" Wexford didn't answer. "Well, it would depend on the degree of hypersensitivity. Nausea, maybe, diarrhoea, dizziness, tinnitis—that's ringing in the ears—breathing difficulties, gastric haemorrhages, oedema of gastric mucosa, possible rupture of the oesophagus. In a person of that age, consequent upon such a shock and localized haemorrhages, I suppose a brain haemorrhage—" He stopped, realizing what he had said.

"Thanks very much," said Wexford. "I think you've more or less described what happened to Mrs. Wrangton on June second after she'd taken four three-hundred-milligram tablets of aspirin."

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Dr. Moss was looking stunned. He looked as if he would never smile again.

Wexford passed an envelope to Dr. Crocker.

"Those are aspirins?"

Crocker looked at them, touched one to his tongue. "I suppose so, but—"

"I've sent the rest away to be analyzed. To be certain. There were fifty-six in the bottle."

"Reg, it's unthinkable there could have been a mistake on the part of the pharmacist, but just supposing by a one-in-a-million chance there was, she couldn't have taken forty-four tablets of aspirin. Not even over the months she couldn't."

"You're being a bit slow," said Wexford. "You prescribed one hundred phenacetin, and one hundred phenacetin were put into that bottle at Fraser's, the chemist's. Between the time the prescription was made up and the day before, or a few days before, or a week before she died, she took forty tablets of phenacetin, leaving sixty in the bottle. But on June second she took four tablets of aspirin. Or, to put it bluntly, some time before June second someone removed those sixty tablets of phenacetin and substituted sixty tablets of aspirin."

Dr. Moss found his voice. "That would be murder."

"Well . . ." Wexford spoke hesitantly. "The hypersensitivity might not have resulted in a stroke. The intent may only have been to cause illness of a more or less severe kind. Ulceration of the stomach, say. That would have meant hospitalization for Mrs. Wrangton. On the Welfare State. No exorbitant nursing home fees to be paid there, no swallowing up of capital or selling of property. Later on, if she survived, she would probably have been transferred, again for free, to a geriatric ward in the same hospital. It's well-known that no private nursing home will take the chronically sick."

"You think Mrs. Betts—?" Dr. Moss began.

"No, I don't. For two good reasons, Mrs. Betts is the one person who wouldn't have done it this way. If she had wanted to kill her mother or to make her seriously ill, why go to all the trouble of changing over sixty tablets in a bottle, when she had only to give Mrs. Wrangton the aspirins in her hand? And if she had changed them, wouldn't she, immediately her mother was dead, have changed them back again?"

"Then who was it?"

"I shall know tomorrow," said Wexford . . .

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Dr. Crocker came to him at his office in the police station.

"Sorry I'm late. I just lost a patient."

Wexford made sympathetic noises. Having walked round the room, eyed the two available chairs, the doctor settled for the edge of Wexford's desk.

"Yesterday," Wexford began, "I had a talk with Mrs. Elsie Parrish." He checked the doctor's exclamation and sudden start forward. "Wait a minute, Len. She dropped a matchbook before we parted. It was one of those with a glossy surface that very easily takes prints. I had the prints on it and those on the phenacetin bottle compared. There were Mrs. Betts's prints on the bottle, and a set that were presumably Mrs. Wrangton's, and a man's that were presumably the painter's. And there was also a very clear set identical to those on the matchbook.

"It was Elsie Parrish who changed those tablets, Len. She did it because she knew that Mrs. Wrangton fully intended to retire to Summerland and that the first money to go, perhaps before the house was sold, would be the few thousands of capital that she and Doreen Betts were to share. Elsie Parrish had waited for years for that money, she wanted to buy a car. A few more years and if she herself survived it would be too late for driving cars. Besides, by then her legacy would have been swallowed up in nursing-home fees."

"A nice old creature like that?" Dr. Crocker said. "That's no proof, her prints on the bottle. She'll have fetched that bottle often enough for old Ivy."

"No. She told me she had never been upstairs in Ivy Wrangton's house."

"Oh, God."

"I don't suppose she saw it as murder. It wouldn't seem like murder, or manslaughter, or grievous bodily harm, changing tablets in a bottle." Wexford sat down, wrinkled up his face. He said crossly, dispiritedly, "I don't know what to do, Len. We've no way of proving Mrs. Wrangton died of aspirin poisoning. We can't exhume her, we can't analyze 'two handfuls of white dust shut in an urn of brass.' And even if we could, would we be so inhumane as to have a woman of—how old is Elsie Parrish?"

"Seventy-eight."

"Seventy-eight up in court on a murder charge. On the other hand, should she be allowed to profit from her crime? Should she be permitted to terrorize pedestrians in a smart little Ford Fiesta?"

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"She won't," said Crocker.

Something in his voice brought Wexford to his feet. "Why? What d'you mean?"

The doctor slid lightly off the edge of the desk. "I told you I'd lost a patient. Elsie Parrish died last night. A neighbor found her and called me."

"Maybe that's for the best. What did she die of?"

"A stroke," said Dr. Crocker, and went.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Helene Melyan's first two stories—rather, her two "first stories"—appeared in the January 1979 issue of EQMM. Now her second story—actually, her third (confusing, isn't it?)—offers us a humorous situation (if ever crime can be called "humorous"). Meet Sid the carpenter and his good friend Reginald the piano tuner . . .

A NEW SCAM

by HELENE MELYAN

It was Sid's idea, really. Sid is a carpenter. He works for himself, small jobs mostly, occasionally a good-sized contract. He is also my friend, sometime-drinking buddy, and occasional assistant when I'm working on a piano that needs some case work. I'm a piano tuner.

We were on our third beer, over at Casey's, about a month ago, when Sid began to look melancholy. With Sid this means that his normal hang-dog look deepens to pure bloodhound, and he sighs deeply until somebody asks why.

"Why?" I asked.

"Life," said Sid, "is not fair." He took another swallow of beer and said, "Reginald, have I ever told you about the Kilpatricks?"

He had not.

"A few months ago I did some work for the Kilpatricks, a sweet-looking, middle-aged couple who lived in a sweet-looking, middle-sized house. I put in a few cabinets, a new kitchen counter, and a tile wall in the bathroom. The whole thing came to $722.

"I should've been suspicious right away, when I gave them the estimate. Most people try to bargain a little, especially when they're dealing with a guy who's his own boss—but no, Kilpatrick just smiled and said, 'Fine. We'll pay cash, as soon as the work is done.'

"Kilpatrick was retired, so they were both always home when I

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came to work. Mrs. K. made my lunch every day for a week—not just sandwiches, mind you, but soup, salad, dessert—just like a restaurant. Kilpatrick hung around while I worked and asked if he could do anything to help, maybe hand me things or something.

"Finally I told them I had only one more day's work left on the job, and I'd finish up on Monday. They both asked—pleaded, actually—if I could come back on Sunday afternoon instead. What could I say? They'd been so nice to me, I had to agree."

Sid sighed, ordered another beer, and continued, "So I finished up late Sunday night. Mrs. K. hands me the money in a little white envelope and says, 'You can count it if you like. It's all there.' It was. Then she gives me a bag of homemade cookies, a scarf she knitted for me while I was working, and a jar of soup to heat up when I get home. I say goodbye, and I swear, there's a lump in my throat.

"Then Kilpatrick shakes my hand, pats me on the back, calls me 'My boy,' and tells me to stop by some time and maybe we'll play some checkers. I almost feel like calling him 'Dad.'

"I put the envelope in my pocket, pick up my tools, and drive home, still thinking about what nice people the Kilpatricks are. I don't like having $722 cash on me, but I figure I'll put it in the bank first thing Monday morning. Besides, who else but the Kilpatricks could know what's in my pocket?

"I'm in my driveway, getting out of my car—and then, all of a sudden, a car roars up behind me, a guy gets out wearing a Donald Duck mask, and points a gun at me.

"I put up my hands. The guy frisks me, like he knows what he's looking for, gets the envelope, and drives away, in a dark car with no license plates. And *voila*, as the French say, I am out $722, and not a damn thing I can do about it."

We were on our fourth beer by then. "Did you call the police?"

"I laugh," said Sid. "Hah. Of course I called the police, who are at this very moment looking for a man in a Donald Duck mask, carrying $722 in a white envelope, and driving a dark car with no license plates. They'll never find him, of course. But I know who it was, just as sure as I'm sitting here: Kilpatrick."

I choked on my beer.

"It all fits," continued Sid. "Who else knew I would be carrying all that cash? Why did they insist I finish up on Sunday, when the banks would be closed, so I'd drive home with the money? And why didn't they argue about the estimate like normal people? Because

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they knew they were going to get it all back. They were in it together. It's probably something they've been doing for years, using the same money, over and over, to get the garden landscaped, have the roof fixed, get the driveway paved.

"It's a beautiful racket. What you call a scam, I believe. They are to be admired, in a way. And nobody would ever suspect a thing, because they're so sweet they make marmalade look sour. Of course, there's no way I can prove anything, not in a million years."

That's when I said, "Sid, what a coincidence. I've got a piano I'm supposed to repair soon for a couple named Kilpatrick. You don't think. . . ?"

Sid's eyebrows shot up. "Five thirty-nine Somerset Way?"

I nodded. And that's when Sid ordered two more beers and said not to worry, he would take care of everything, and we'd fix it so that never another honest journeyman in this town would have to fear for his wages. After four beers Sid sounds like that. He gets eloquent.

The Kilpatricks were every bit as nice to me as they'd been to Sid, and in spite of what I knew about them, I couldn't help liking them. The day before I was through with the piano, I called Sid and said, "Maybe you're wrong. Maybe somebody else followed you home—a neighbor of theirs, or some creep who makes a habit of following people home on Sunday nights."

"Did they argue about the estimate?" asked Sid.

They hadn't.

"Did they promise you cash when you're finished?"

They did.

"And did they ask you—beg you—to come finish up on Sunday?"

They did.

"I rest my case," said Sid. "We proceed as planned."

"But what if they call the police afterwards?"

"Crooks do not call the police," said Sid. "And the Kilpatricks are crooks, remember?"

By Sunday, 9:00 p.m., the Kilpatricks' old upright was in splendid working order, with new strings and hammers. I had it voiced and tuned, and the Kilpatricks were delighted.

"That'll be $850," I said. Mrs. Kilpatrick smiled and handed me a little white envelope. I didn't bother to count the contents.

"It's been so nice having you work here these past two weeks,"

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sighed Mrs. Kilpatrick. "I want you to take these chocolate cookies, and this nice warm scarf, and a jar of soup you can heat up when you get home."

"Stop by some time and we'll play some checkers," said Kilpatrick, shaking my hand, which was already shaking. It was 9:05. Sid was coming at 9:15.

"I think I'd better test the piano once more," I told them, and they beamed at me. Boy, was it hard to believe they were crooks. But after what Sid had told me, I thought I could see a slight shiftiness in Kilpatrick's glance, a certain *seaminess* in the wife.

I was halfway through Chopin's Waltz in F Flat Minor, second time around, when the doorbell rang, and it was Sid.

I knew the gun was a fake, but the Kilpatricks didn't.

When they were both tied to kitchen chairs, bound and gagged, Sid pointed the gun at them, laughed, and pulled the trigger. A little flag that said, "Bang!" came out the end of the barrel.

Then Sid and I rummaged through a few drawers, checked under the mattress and in the closets, and altogether came up with one good watch, $400 in cash, and a bottle of old Scotch.

"We will consider this payment of the $722 you owe me for services rendered," said Sid, bowing from the waist. "And next time, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Duck, I caution you to think twice before you attempt to cheat Sid the carpenter and Reginald the piano tuner."

The Kilpatricks, with only their eyes able to move, were looking wildly at each other, and at Sid and me.

"Look at the guilt in their eyes," whispered Sid. "I tell you, we should get a medal for this."

We drove home in our separate cars. Sid said it would be hours before the Kilpatricks wriggled out of their bonds. And it would be years, he said, before they would try the Donald Duck bit again.

I was just inside my door when the phone rang. It was Sid, giggling strangely.

"You'll never guess who just called me," said Sid. "The police. Seems they caught a guy over in Scottsdale driving a dark car with no license plates. And guess what they found under the front seat?"

A Donald Duck mask.

"So that's the story. As you can see, it was all an honest mistake. And like I said, the whole thing was Sid's idea, anyway. You do believe me, don't you, Officer? Officer. . . ?"

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a *NEW* detective story by

STEPHEN WASYLYK

Loner Gunde was a known murderer, a big-time drug pusher, a cruel and ruthless enforcer for the loan sharks, a strongarm gangster who enjoyed smashing people up. So when someone bumped him off, everyone should have been happy, including the cops. But murder is murder, and cops have to do something about it. Meet detective Cole, who does do something about it . . .

FOOLS OF THE WORLD

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

When I heard the name on the early morning newscast, I spun the volume higher to catch the rest of the story. Afterward, the thought came that some people wrote their own obituaries early and all that was necessary was to fill in the final date.

When I walked into the squad room an hour later, Mandola motioned me into his glass-walled office with a wave of his big square hand.

Elbows on his cluttered desk, fingers laced, he leaned forward in what I call his reaming-out pose, but all he said was: "You've heard someone killed Loner Gunde?"

"It was no surprise. He'd earned it ten times over."

He handed me a file. "I can't argue with that, but it's against the law to murder a man, even someone like Gunde. Take Alzado and look into it."

I settled at my desk and called in the thin dapper Alzado, who claimed his blood line went back to the grandees of Spain. He looked it.

"What did we get?" Alzado asked.

"Loner Gunde. Call the ME's office to see if they have anything."

I went through the reports. Gunde had been shot while standing

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on the corner of Ninth and Race streets at approximately one o'clock in the morning, a few feet from his Cadillac. An anonymous caller had reported the pistol shot. The first patrol car on the scene had found the corner deserted except for the body of Gunde under a street light. After the other cars arrived, the usual crowd of neighbors had gathered, but no one had seen anything.

Somehow they never did, the first time around.

I pulled my phone toward me and punched out a number. The voice that answered was deep, a touch of irritation around the edges.

"Sandy, this is Cole," I said. "Your car was first at the Gunde thing. What can you tell me I don't see on this report?"

"Get off the phone. That bum has already cost me an hour's sleep. I ask you, Cole, did he have to get himself killed in my area?"

"You're not answering my question."

"All right. The last two weeks we've seen him on that corner several nights. Just why he was there, I don't know."

"Didn't you ask?"

"Are you crazy? You think two of us were going to go up to him and ask? When a guy is six feet six, weighs two fifty, has a black belt in karate, and likes to maim cops? We watched, that's all we did. It's ten to one he was dealing, but we never saw any action. We wouldn't. No one would approach him with our car in sight. We turned it in for the narcs to follow up. All it would have taken was a little stakeout, but nothing came of it as far as I know."

"What's the neighborhood like?"

"Kids on the way up and old people who like the convenience of being close to center city. Most of the small homes on Ninth and all the three-story brownstones on Race have been converted into rooms and apartments. When you come right down to it, not Gunde's type of neighborhood at all. Might be a little seedy, but still too high-class for him."

"That may be why he was there," I said. "Go to bed."

I went back to Mandola's office. "Sandy Hill says he turned in a report about Gunde probably pushing drugs on that corner and suggested that narco follow it up. I know we're supposed to be one big team, but Augustus doesn't like me very much, so he'll tell me someone will look it up and send through a memo on it in a few days. He'll probably answer you."

Mandola sighed and reached for the phone. "Some day I'm going to send you for a refresher course in Human Relations."

"Won't help. Augustus isn't human."

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I sat and watched Mandola's eyes roll helplessly while Augustus talked. Finally Mandola said, "Sure, sure. We all have the same problem." When he hung up, his eyes were glassy. "How do you get me into these things? With all I have to do, I had to listen to him tell me how short of manpower he is and how everybody in narco, including him, has to work twenty-four hours a day and nobody appreciates it."

"Which means he never got to it."

"Get out," said Mandola.

When I came back to the desk, Alzado said, "The ME says to check with him after lunch."

I nodded. "Let's go talk to some people who didn't see anything."

Ninth and Race was only ten minutes away. On the way over Alzado asked, "Why are we doing this, Cole? Who cares who shot Loner Gunde? I mean, after all, we're talking about a guy who killed three people we're sure of but can't prove and no one knows how many more. He was one of the biggest peddlers in town and the loan sharks all used him as a collector because he enjoyed smashing people up. It always took a half dozen cops to bring him in and some of those were sure to end up in the emergency room afterward. He was big and mean and crazy, so what the hell. We should just drive around, get a cup of coffee, go back and type up something that sounds reasonable, then forget it. Even Mandola wouldn't care."

"You don't know Mandola very well."

I drove out the Parkway, which angled diagonally across the city. Ninth was one-way north and I turned into it. Race was only two streets away, even narrower than Ninth. I pulled into Race, ran the car halfway up on the sidewalk because there was no place to park, and walked back to the intersection.

The entrance of a boarded-up, long-closed corner taproom frowned diagonally across the intersection at the massive, neo-Grecian rear of the main public library. Across Ninth Street was a solid wall of dirty red brick, two-story rowhouses crouched behind high, narrow, gingerbreaded porches in need of paint. The other side of Race began with a small, street-level drugstore below the first of the three-story brownstones that turned Race Street into a canyon. Like the taproom owner, the druggist had boarded the windows and gone wherever he could still run a business without staring down the barrel of a gun too often. But Race Street was clean, the homes in good repair, the cars lined at the curb still in one piece.

Sandy had been right. This was not Gunde's usual territory.

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"Only the people on the west side of Ninth or the north side of Race could see the corner," I told Alzado. "You take Ninth. I'll take Race."

He crossed the street to begin ringing doorbells.

I walked up the steps of the first brownstone, scanned the names listed on the mail drops in the vestibule, and pressed the button marked *Manager*. When he opened the door, his undershirted stomach came through first. The rest of him was equally unimpressive, from the top of his bald head to his stockinged feet.

I held out my badge. "Give me the names of the people who live in the rooms that face the street."

"I'm one. A broad named Fletcher is on the second floor. Third floor is vacant."

"How many other people in the building?"

"Two old couples."

"Would you know if any of them was out last night?"

He snorted. "People their age go to bed at ten."

I turned and studied the corner and decided to shoot a little dice. "Why didn't you leave your name when you called the police?"

I came up with a seven.

"Because—" He stook a step backward. "I didn't call anybody."

"Sure you did. This house has the best view of the corner and the caller was a man."

He held up a hand. "All right, but I don't want to get involved, understand? I heard a shot, so I looked out and saw him lying there. I figured he wasn't taking a nap."

"Did you see anyone else?"

"Not then, but I went back to the window after making the call in time to see a young guy in a white T-shirt grab something out of the Caddie, jump over the body, and take off down Ninth. The patrol car came across Race or those guys would have seen him."

"Exactly what did he look like?"

"White T-shirt, jeans, long hair, and very fast feet."

"And you intended to keep this to yourself?"

He shrugged. "What do I care about some bum getting killed? I told you, I didn't want to get involved, but I guess there's no way to stay out of it. Next time I don't look out no matter what I hear."

"Do that and you put us out of business. I'll be back to you."

I climbed the stairs to the second-floor front and knocked.

She was in her middle twenties, wearing a turtle neck and slacks, her brown hair long. She had a rather plain face that magically

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became beautiful when she smiled at my badge. "I didn't do it."

"I hope not. The question is, did you see anything?"

The eyebrows arched. "I have much better things to do than look out my window at one in the morning."

"Exactly what were you doing?"

The light in her eyes danced. "That could be an embarrassing question. After all, he's married. I really must protect his reputation."

"Very noble."

"I'm the self-sacrificing type." She extended her wrists. "Go ahead. Take me in. But I refuse to give you his name. My lips are sealed. How would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I'd like nothing better, but right now I have to keep moving."

I took several steps down the hall.

"Sergeant," she said.

I turned.

Her voice was almost wistful. "I was in bed. Asleep. Alone."

"I know," I said. "But don't worry about it. With your smile, it's only a temporary condition and will leave no lasting scars."

When I reached the street, two young women were waiting for me on the steps of the next house. Both cradled infants in their arms.

One of them, a small blonde who looked almost too young to be a mother, said, "I saw you from the window. You're a detective, right?"

"Right. My name is Cole. I'd like to know if anyone saw what happened on the corner last night."

"We can't help you. Verna here is on the first floor, I'm on the second. We and our husbands were playing cards when we heard the shot, but when we looked out, all we saw was the man lying there."

"Did you see another man in a white T-shirt?"

"We didn't see anyone."

"Who else lives in this building?"

"Only Mr. Seward. He has the third-floor apartment, but he isn't in. I saw him leave earlier for the library. He goes there every morning and brings home a few books. You should talk to him. I've often seen his lights on late. He may have seen something."

"Listen," said Verna. "The man who was killed. Do we have to put up with that? I mean this is a quiet neighborhood. Why did the police let him push drugs on our street corner?"

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"Did you see him do that?"

"What else could he have been doing? Cars would stop, he'd talk to the drivers for a few minutes, we'd see them hand each other something, and then the cars would drive away."

"But you never told this to the police?"

"Why should we? I mean, we could see the patrol car go by once in a while. They could see what we were seeing."

"Not really. No one would stop if he noticed the police car. All the two policemen would see would be a man standing on the corner. There's no law against that, no matter who the man is. It might look suspicious, but there was nothing the police could do."

"Well, look," said Verna. "If we called, we would be witnesses, right? I mean, we'd have to go to court and all of that."

"Maybe, but if you were worried about the neighborhood, wouldn't it have been worth it?"

I left them and went to the next house, glancing back at the corner. This would be the last building from which it could be seen clearly without pressing close to the window or poking your head out. As far as the other residents were concerned, the only way they could have seen anything was to have been coming in or going out.

I found one person home in the next house, a long-haired university student named Leclaire, who looked like a gypsy fiddler, which was a little remarkable because most of the hirsute younger types usually reminded me of Mexican bandits. He had seen Gunde several times, last night included, had an idea of what was going on and had considered it none of his business.

By the time I canvassed the rest of the block and worked my way up the other side, I had acquired a convoy of small children and very little other information because most of the people were at work. Those I talked to claimed to have seen nothing, even though most had known why Gunde was there. Word travels quickly in that type of neighborhood.

As I crossed the street, an elderly man, a book under his arm, slowly climbed the steps of the house where Verna and the blonde lived, pausing for a long moment at the top before going inside.

Seward, I thought. I went after him and knocked on his door.

He wasn't tall, but the way he stood gave that impression. He was lean with old age, almost gaunt, his clothes hanging loosely, the bones of his face prominent, the hair white and close-clipped. His face was pasty, and fatigue from climbing the stairs had etched sharp lines around his mouth.

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He shrugged when I told him who I was and what I was looking for.

"I've watched the fools of the world killing each other with their armies or in the dark of night on street corners for eighty years, Sergeant, and I have lost interest in the things they do. I no longer listen to the radio, watch television, or read newspapers. Nor do I peer from windows."

He must have felt he was too abrupt because he smiled. "Come in."

The room was sparsely furnished, but the furniture was good, a huge leather-covered wingchair angled near the window to catch the daylight, an efficient-looking reading lamp alongside it on a small table. The chair shared dominance of the room with hundreds of books—on shelves, in cabinets, piled on the floor and on a small desk in the corner.

He smiled again. "Now you know why I prefer to live so close to the library."

"It looks as though you don't bother to return what you borrow."

His eyes twinkled. "I have been known to lose a book occasionally, for which I pay."

I walked to the chair and looked out the window. The corner was in plain sight.

"You were up last night?"

"I was, but the shade was drawn. I heard what I took to be a pistol shot and then police cars. I knew something had happened but I wasn't interested."

"But you did know about the man who stood on the corner."

"The two young women downstairs told me. They also told me they suspected he was dealing in drugs. I suggested they call the police."

"It's too bad you never raised the shade. You might have seen something that would be useful." I glanced at a collection of framed photographs on the wall above the desk. There were several of Seward shaking hands with dignitaries and political figures and military men of the past, some of them national figures. Another was of a younger Seward holding a little girl of perhaps six in his arms. Another, yellowed with age, showed a very youthful Seward with one hand on the wooden propeller of an old biplane.

"You've had a full life, Mr. Seward."

He nodded. "I suppose I have."

On the sidewalk I headed back toward the corner. The Fletcher

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woman, her purse slung over her shoulder, came out of the house. She smiled that remarkable smile as I approached.

"On your way to work?" I asked.

"At Pier Nineteen. I'm a dining-room hostess."

Pier Nineteen was one of the better restaurants in town, located down at the waterfront so that diners could look out over the river. I couldn't imagine anyone minding a wait for a table once she flashed that smile.

"One of these days I'll stop by," I said.

"Do that."

Alzado was at the door of the last house on Ninth Street. A bearded young man with long blond hair, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, came up the sidewalk and placed a foot on the bottom step of the porch before he saw him. The young man stopped. He looked around quickly, saw me, then whirled and took off at top speed past the library. I yelled to Alzado and went after him, angling to cut him off, but I had to dodge a car and ended 30 yards behind. He cut across the street and into a passageway between the houses, turned at the next street, and skidded through the gate of an area at the rear of a commercial building that was surrounded by an eight-foot-high wooden fence.

I have him, I thought. He has to slow down going through the place.

I didn't have him at all. He cut sharply, leaped, bounded off the lid of a metal trash can, grasped the top of the fence, and vaulted over.

I tried to do the same. Unfortunately, he left the trash can rocking and when my foot hit, it was moving away and went out from under me. Instead of going up and over gracefully, I flew straight ahead into the fence. Pain tore at my left shoulder, my head hit and I dropped, stunned, as the trash cans clattered and danced around me.

Alzado came running up. "You hurt, Cole?"

I croaked and pointed at the top of the fence with my good arm.

"He's gone, Cole, I can't get him now."

"House," I croaked. "Last house."

"That's where he lives?"

I nodded.

"All right. We'll get him. Just take it easy until I get an ambulance."

I shook my head and struggled to my feet.

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There were six Alzados now and they refused to stand still.

I sat down abruptly. Suddenly there were six young women named Fletcher leaning over me, their faces concerned. Then they were gone.

I came to as they were unloading me at the hospital. My shoulder was on fire, my head ached, and my throat felt numb, but I was content. The six images of everything were gone. There was even only one crack in the ceiling of the emergency room. I was sure of that. I had seen it before.

Mandola said, "You've got a possible concussion and you tore a ligament in your shoulder."

I pointed to my throat.

"You hit it somehow. Temporary paralysis. It will wear off."

I made a writing motion.

"Go to sleep. You stay here overnight so they can check out your head, which is something I always thought should be done."

I glared at him.

"If you're worried about the young guy who got away, we have a bulletin out on him. Alzado went back to the house and checked him out. His name is Kron. He has the second-floor front room there. Alzado found a half dozen packets of heroin in a brown paper bag and a handful of .45 automatic shells, but no gun, so maybe you were lucky not to catch the guy. Your voice should be back tomorrow, so you can tell us what you know about him then. Not likely we'll find him tonight anyway." He turned at the doorway. "I've got to hand it to you, Cole. You always pick an interesting way to get banged up. I can see them all laughing when they read my report. *In pursuit of a suspect Sergeant Cole leaped headfirst into a wooden fence and rendered himself unconscious.* Do you know you're the only cop in the city with a woodgrain pattern on his forehead?"

I had to mouth the words as I pointed at the door but he knew what I was saying.

An hour later a nurse I knew dropped in. "A woman named Fletcher called to ask how you were. I told her you were fine but temporarily unable to speak. She said to tell you that if it would help, she would volunteer for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation." She smiled wickedly. "I told her I had already tried that, and in my opinion, an oxygen mask was more effective at your age."

All I could do was make threatening gestures as she closed the door, laughing.

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I could speak in a whisper by the time Alzado dropped in that evening.

"Get a statement from the manager of that house on the corner," I told him. "If we have a mug shot of Kron, see if he can identify him."

"I called the ME," he said. "Gunde was killed by a .45 slug that entered his chest at a downward angle. Big as Gunde was, the only way that could have happened was if he had been lying down or the shooter was above him. I figure Kron watched him for a couple of nights, knew where he kept the horse, downed him from the window of his room, then ran down and grabbed the bag. There was enough in there to keep him in Happyland for weeks."

I nodded. "Makes sense."

My shoulder encased in tape, they let me out in the morning.

Alzado picked me up. "I'll take you to your apartment."

"Nothing to do there but sit. Mandola won't let me work but he can't stop me from hanging around a few hours a day."

"Take off for somewhere."

"I can't as long as they insist on checking the shoulder every day."

I stopped at my desk when I saw the brown envelope. The contents, an 8 × 10 glossy, showed Gunde, a little battered, his hands cuffed behind him. I had him by one arm. I remembered when it had appeared in the newspaper, headlined: *Detective Subdues Berserk Defendant.*

Four years ago Gunde had been on trial for running a red light and demolishing a small car, killing the driver, a young girl. I had simply stopped in to have a few words with the Assistant D.A. prosecuting the case, so I happened to be there when Gunde decided that he didn't like the trial and began swatting people. The sheriff's deputies acting as courtroom attendants tried to overpower him by weight of numbers. I was far more practical. I splintered a heavy oak courtroom chair across his head, which stunned him long enough for me to get the cuffs on him.

"Edwards of the *Bulletin* found it in the photo file on Gunde when he was looking for a picture to go with the story on the killing," said Alzado. "Since they no longer have any use for it, he thought you'd like to have it."

I tossed the photo aside, took two steps toward Mandola's office, went back, and retrieved the picture. When it had appeared in the paper it had been blown up and tightly cropped. The original took

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in the faces of a good many of the people in the courtroom. One was familiar.

Mandola came up. "Will you get out of here? With that shoulder and bandaged head you're giving the place a bad public image."

I held out the photo. "The elderly guy behind the Assistant D.A. is named Seward. He lives two doors away from where Gunde was killed. What was he doing at the trial?"

Mandola studied the glossy. "You know many of these retired people sit in on trials. They even have a club."

"Not this one. He claims he reads all day. I think I'll talk to Jonas."

"Look," said Mandola. "I know damned well the shoulder hurts along with the lump on your head. Just go home. So the old man was in the courtroom. What does that have to do with Gunde? He was shot with a .45. We found .45 shells and a bag of H in Kron's room. When Kron saw two cops asking questions, he took off. What more do you want?"

I slid the photo into the envelope. "I'll let you know."

I found Jonas, the Assistant D.A., getting ready to cross the street to the courthouse. I pushed the photo at him. "Do you know the old man standing behind you?"

"Sure. His name is Seward. The girl Gunde killed was his granddaughter. He was one angry old man when the judge gave Gunde eighteen months to three years which meant he'd probably be out in a year. Why?"

"He lives two doors from where Gunde was shot."

He stared at me. "Come on, Cole. Do you know who he is? The man spent forty years at the university. He was provost when he retired. He's hardly the type to kill anyone. Diving into that fence yesterday scrambled what few brains you have."

I reached for his phone and called Alzado. "Look up this guy Seward," I told him. "All the way back to his cradle."

"What for?"

The shoulder was aching and so was my head. "Just do it," I snapped. "Who has the slug that killed Gunde?"

"The lab. As soon as we get Kron's gun, Mandola wants a ballistics check."

"Call me there."

Perkins, the lab man, slid the .45 slug across the desk. The nose was somewhat flattened.

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"No question this is a .45?"

"Standard 230 grain, soft nose." He pushed a labeled box toward me. "These were in Kron's room. See for yourself."

The box held a dozen .45 automatic shells. I held the nose from one alongside the slug. They seemed identical. I thought of Kron crouching in the window of his room, a .45 automatic trained on Gunde. The street was about 30 feet wide, maybe 35. Add eight for the corner, five for the sidewalk and another five for the porch, three for the steps. Better than fifty feet, shooting down. At night. Not an easy shot for anyone with a .45 automatic, which was designed to knock people down at short range, particularly for a shaky-handed doper quivering with anticipation and sweating in fear of what would happen to him if he missed.

I handed it to Perkins. "Everyone keeps saying .45 automatic because of those shells found in Kron's room. Suppose it didn't come out of an automatic?"

Perkins smiled. "We'd know that the minute we checked Kron's gun when they bring it in, but if it will make you feel any better I'll run a preliminary check now."

He dug out some sample .45 slugs from a cabinet and compared them one at a time with the slug that had killed Gunde. He leaned back after the last one, his speculative eyes on me, and said, "You're beautiful, Cole. It couldn't have come out of an automatic. The lands and grooves are different. How in the hell did you figure that out?"

"I didn't. What did it come out of?"

"Give me a few minutes. I have a lot of reference material to work through."

I closed my eyes. My shoulder ached, the pain deep, and my head throbbed. I wondered what I was doing here instead of lying down at home and taking it easy. As Alzado had said, who cares who killed Gunde?

Perkins' voice opened my eyes. "Look for a Webley revolver with the cylinder faced down to take .45 auto rim shells."

The phone rang. He listened and handed it to me. "Alzado."

Alzado said, "Here's what you wanted on Seward. His father was in the State Department. He was born in Washington but grew up in England. Was a lieutenant with the Royal Flying Corps in 1918, remained in England after the war, graduated from Cambridge, came back to this country in the twenties, has been here at the university since except for three years with Eighth Air Force Headquarters in London during World War Two. One son, married, who

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moved to California two years ago, two grandchildren, two great-grandchildren. Need any more?"

"Not right now."

"Listen, we picked up Kron. He says he didn't shoot Gunde. What else? He claims he was watching out of his window when he heard the shot and saw Gunde fall. He figured it would take a few minutes for the car to get there, so he ran down, grabbed the bag, and took off. He also says he never had a .45. Those shells belonged to a guy who used to live with him. What do you think of that story?"

"I've heard worse."

I went downstairs to the parking lot, picked up my car, and drove to Ninth and Race. I parked behind a cab at the curb in front of the second house, climbed the steps to the third floor, and knocked.

Seward nodded at my arm. "I heard about your accident, Sergeant. Nothing serious, I hope."

I looked beyond him. The room was remarkably clean, the books all neatly stacked away. There was a small valise next to the desk. I pushed past him to the window and measured the distance to the corner with my eyes. "It was a helluva good shot, Mr. Seward. I've fired a few guns in my time and I would have never tried it with a pistol. What made you think you could do it?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"A Webley is, or was, a British military weapon, Mr. Seward. Gunde was killed with one. You served as a lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps in 1918. I suppose the Webley was standard issue for officers then. You kept yours as a memento, but I'm sure you never intended to use it until you saw Gunde on that corner. He killed your granddaughter and practically walked away from it." I turned to face him. "What was it you said about the fools of the world killing each other?"

He moved slowly to the chair and sat down. "It was something I had to do. I am quite willing to pay for it."

"How?"

He glanced up, surprised. "The penalty the law demands."

He had leaned back in the chair, a tired old man with the tortured look in his eyes that belongs to people who live with constant pain.

"You'll be dead before the trial, Mr. Seward," I said softly. "How long do you have?"

He smiled. "You're remarkable, Sergeant. No one else has noticed."

"How long?"

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He shrugged. "A month. Six weeks. Two months. No one is certain."

"But you *can* travel."

"To my family in California for whatever time is left. I would never return, of course. I intended to write to the two young women downstairs to dispose of the contents of the apartment and to divide the proceeds between them. They have been very nice to me."

"Now, your family will all fly East and visit you in the hospital prison ward and I do not know if your great-grandchildren will even be allowed. Why? To kill a man like Gunde, who probably would have been shot sooner or later by someone with far less to lose? You *are* a fool, Mr. Seward."

He sat in the chair, a small shrunken figure of an old man, staring at the floor.

"Where is the Webley?"

He gestured. "In the desk drawer."

I pulled the revolver out and broke it open. One shell had been fired. I studied him for a moment before I said, "If I had been five minutes later, you would have been gone. Let's pretend it happened that way."

He rose, standing tall. "I refuse to be an object of pity."

"No, Mr. Seward, you're just a fool. When you get to California, you can start an organization called Fools of the World. The membership potential is enormous." I smiled. "You can enroll me as a charter member. Now get going or you'll miss your plane."

From the window I watched the cab leave. An hour and a half later I called Mandola and asked him to come to Seward's apartment. He sat in Seward's chair while I told him how Seward killed Gunde and why.

"Too bad you missed him," he said thoughtfully.

"The cab pulled away as I drove up."

He picked up an empty prescription bottle from the table and turned it over in his fingers. "How long do you think it will take to find him again?"

I shrugged. "Can't say. After all, we'll have to work it in. It isn't as though it's an emergency. He's just an old man who shot the man who killed his granddaughter."

Mandola extended his hand, the prescription bottle balanced in his palm. His eyes found mine. "How long, Cole?"

"Six weeks or so."

He nodded. "I understand. I'll leave it to you to clean up when

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you get back. Just remember, we get paid to apprehend people who shoot other people, and as the lawyers say, justice must be served."

"That is one of the great truths of all time," I said solemnly.

He grinned. "Let me have the Webley and get out of here. I don't want to see you until you're ready for duty unless it's for something important like having a few drinks."

I had my hand on the door of the car when the Fletcher woman came up the sidewalk.

"I didn't think you'd be running around so soon," she said, "but I'm happy to see it. Do you have time for that cup of coffee now?"

"Lady, I don't have anything to do for a month."

DETECTIVERSE

BOOK CROOK

by VIRGIL STRIEBY

The bookstore browser's head inclines
From reading rows of shelved book spines
To hunt whodunits. Soon this 'tec
Will find the crook is in his neck.

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DISCOVERY

John Dickson Carr's "lost story"

Hundreds of scholars have spent thousands of hours digging like archeologists in the dusty tombs of libraries and poring over the musty volumes of rebound newspapers and magazines, searching for a "lost" or "unknown" story by Edgar Allan Poe and hoping to find a fourth tale of ratiocination about C. Auguste Dupin, or even the beginning or the embryonic notes of an unfinished tale. But, alas, the search has been fruitless—so far. For hope springs eternal, and the search for "lost" or "unknown" stories goes on. (We will say nothing about the "lost" Sherlock Holmes story which nearly shook the world.)

In the 38 years of EQMM we have discovered and published many lost and unknown stories—by such famous writers in and out of the mystery field as G. K. Chesterton, Melville Davisson Post, Agatha Christie, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ring Lardner, O. Henry, L. Frank Baum, Dashiell Hammett, Jacques Futrelle, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Walt Whitman—yes, and many others. But who would have dreamed there was a "lost" story by John Dixon (sic) Carr? We are grateful to Professor Douglas G. Greene of the Department of History, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, and to Francis M. Nevins, Jr. for making available the text of a story titled "The Door to Doom," which appeared in the June 1935 issue of a magazine called "Horror Stories," and to the best of our knowledge and research, this story has not been included in any of John Dickson Carr's or Carter Dickson's books, and has never been reprinted—the story has been lost to Mr. Carr's multitude of readers for more than forty years!

"The Door to Doom" was written early in Mr. Carr's career—his first book was published in 1930; but the hand of the master is clearly evident, foreshadowing the great works of mood and menace that this master of the macabre has left as a permanent heritage in our beloved genre.

"The Door to Doom" will be included in the John Dickson Carr

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book tentatively titled TERROR'S DARK TOWER AND OTHER TALES, *edited by Professor Douglas G. Greene and to be published by Harper & Row late this year or early next.*

And now—to "the thing that catches and crushes" . . .

THE DOOR TO DOOM

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

"If monsieur takes the shortcut through the wood," said the taller of the two peasants, "he will arrive at his destination before sundown."

"And at his last destination," said the shorter one, "before moonrise."

Peter Maynard turned around quickly. His French was not good enough to make him certain that he had understood the idiom of the thick-wooded province of Orleans. And, anyway, the words were of no importance. It was the tone he did not like, with its dry chuckle and smacking of lips.

The two peasants were on the overhanging bank beneath which the road twisted—the taller leaning against the brown earth of the slope; the shorter silhouetted against a murky sky at the top. He stood amid blowing grass, with the wind fluttering his clothes like the trees behind him. And he chuckled those words as though into the neck of his blouse.

Maynard hesitated. Shifting the knapsack on his back, he took a step forward down the road that led to the wood; stopped, turned, and stared up at the peasant.

"You said?" he asked sharply.

It was as though the other had been caught off balance. The taller man, who was reflectively running dirt through his brown fingers, came to his aid. His wheezy rumble followed a shrug.

"Monsieur heard, then. Louis-Cyr will have his joke. Monsieur is an American, is he not? Yes. Then he would not understand. That is the way to the town of Chartres—there." He pointed at the wood.

"But I only meant," croaked his companion, smiling, "a very little joke! Blood of the world, I am not without courtesy! Monsieur will

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see, *voyez,* that a storm is coming. Wherever he is going, he can assuredly reach there before the moon rises on a night like this. *Ohè!"*

This was true enough. Maynard, who was tired and hungry and strangely cold, heard the hiss of wind rise in the trees and saw a flicker of lightning in the tumbled sky. It was growing so dark that he could barely see the shorter man grinning at him. Still, there was nothing for it but to push on to Chartres; nine kilometers by the highroad, but only four, according to these men, if he took the shortcut. He paused again.

"There is, perhaps, an inn along this way?"

"Ah! The best in France, monsieur!—thanks, monsieur!"

The coin Maynard tossed was caught, and he trudged on. But he could still feel the short man grinning behind him. It affected him unpleasantly; the more so as the whole sky went white with lightning. The wood affected him unpleasantly, too, where the soggy grass-patched path bred gnats under the shadow of soggy maple trees. It grew darker as he plodded on, stamping ahead of him with his ash stick. There was an unclean smell about the place, and more of a rustling than should come from silver birches. Once he could have sworn that something was following his passage from tree to tree, keeping out of sight. But he had little time to observe. The wood glared with lightning; thunder rattled and split down the sky; and, with a sudden rush growing to a roar, the storm tore down.

There was little protection from the trees. They seemed all trunk and no leaves. When they did not let the blast drench him, they found crevices in his clothes for the rain to soak in rivulets. His shirt was black with water in two minutes, but he splashed steadily on, cursing this walking trip and the uproar of the rain. A walking trip through France, eh? Jim Hanwick had suggested it, had he? The drowsy countryside, eh? He was to meet Jim Hanwick that night at the Hotel du Grand Monaque in Chartres. He was to walk on through the rain, was he, while Jim came down comfortably from Paris on a train? Now, if he could only find that inn—

He blundered into a tree trunk, and stopped.

"Hell," said Maynard aloud, and very distinctly. "I can't stand this."

Then the lightning flared again, and he saw that there was somebody standing almost at his elbow.

For a second it brought the heart into his throat. Then he saw a woman's face, and dark eyes, and rain-wet lips drawn back from

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her teeth in terror. He saw this small face against a shapeless cloak with a hood, motionless in the flooded path, before it went dark. She cried out something, and he heard a splashing of footsteps.

"*Madame!*" he shouted. "*Mademoiselle! Restez tranquille, je vous en prie!* Wait, I beg of you. I'm hunting for the inn. Could you direct me to it?"

The footsteps stopped. He felt someone staring through the darkness. Then, to his astonishment, a low voice spoke in excellent English.

"What is it you wish?"

"Mademoiselle," said Maynard, and in that wild moment he remembered solemnly lifting his sodden hat in the dark, "this is much better. I am soaked to the skin, as I imagine you must be, and I am looking for the inn. Where is the inn?"

The rain lashed steadily through a brief pause. Then: "Inn? What inn? There is no inn."

"But they told me—"

"They would tell you anything!" the voice called. "There is no inn, I tell you! Go back the way you came; go to Chartres by the high-road. Go!"

Maynard replaced his hat. "Mademoiselle," he said politely, "I have been in this infernal wood over half an hour, and I must be more than halfway through it. I do not intend to go back now, inn or no inn. Besides, if you don't mind me saying so, where do *you* go?"

He felt her close to him. She spoke low and fiercely. "Please don't be a fool. Do you want it to catch you and crush you to death?"

Then she had vanished—and he wondered if he had suddenly gone mad. He called to her, and was answered only by the roar of the rain. He cursed her, yet she did not appear. Finally he resumed his march, angry, puzzled, and uneasy.

He had walked only a hundred yards more when he saw lights. It was the inn, no doubt. He could see nothing except yellow light shining through chinks in the shutters, on stone that might once have been whitewashed, and a banging sign above the door. Ducking up against the entry, he found a heavy iron knocker and hammered it sharply. There was no answer. Yet he had a strange feeling that the moment before there had been movement inside; that this was suddenly hushed and tense, waiting. He knocked again, and one of the shutters opened a crack.

"Who is there?" A man's voice asked, gruff but suddenly whining,

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filled with a kind of surly terror.

"A traveler. I am looking for shelter—"

"Hah," said the voice, with a little grunt like relief. "One is sorry, monsieur. But the inn is full. You must go away."

As the shutter began to close Maynard's wrath boiled. "My friend," he yelled, "an innkeeper must at least give a hot drink and provide a fire. That's the law. Will you let me in, or shall I mention you to the police?"

Behind the shutter he thought he heard voices murmuring: queer, ugly, gloating voices. Then he heard a brief smack of laughter, abruptly strangled. The shutter closed. The door opened.

When he dodged inside, he took a moment to shake himself and brush the water out of his eyes before he turned around.

He was in a low passage with a stone floor, smelling none too well, and lit only by the oil lamp in his host's hand. His host was a squat, powerful man with a blue-chinned jaw and a moist reddish face. The little black eyes looked unwinkingly at Maynard as he held the lamp high. He wore a dirty white apron which covered most of his clothes, and Maynard saw that its grime was spotted with brownish stains, and that his hairy arms were bare to the elbows.

"Bear witness, then," he said abruptly, "that you have been let in." He followed Maynard's look toward his apron. "Ah! Monsieur must excuse me. I have been butchering."

He turned back to the door with great urbanity and slowly shot the bolts. "It is safely locked now. This way, if you please."

He led Maynard, who had an impulse to look over his shoulder, into a long low room with greasy walls and a sawdust-sprinkled floor. Maynard saw a bar-counter with a few bottles stacked behind, and a board of hooks on which hung one solitary key. Though he had a feeling that there had been several people here, the room was now deserted except for a woman sitting before a fire in the big stone chimney piece. She was fat to shapelessness, and wore a shawl over her head. He could see only a faint blackish moustache on her upper lip, and a grin. The rain drove and rustled against the house.

"Monsieur is welcome," continued the innkeeper—his nervousness had come back—"to the Inn of the Beautiful Prospect. There is the fire. Make way for the gentleman, madame my wife. Monsieur would like some rum, perhaps, with hot water?"

Maynard unslung his knapsack. He was shivering.

"Yes. And a room where I can change my clothes."

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The innkeeper turned. "I have told you that it is impossible. Impossible, do you hear! We have no rooms. We are full."

By this time more curious than insistent, Maynard pointed to the one key on the rack. The innkeeper stared at him a moment, then glanced behind; when he turned back again, his face was white.

"God of mercy," he said very softly, and jabbed his hand across his eyes. "It is there again, yes." He turned to the woman. "Do *you* do this to torment me? Do you wish to drive me mad? It was not there a moment ago, that key. Did you put it back?"

"No," said the woman. She did not turn, but Maynard saw the whites of her eyes flash. She giggled. "Not I, my heart's desire. The one who put it there is crushed and mangled, *voyez,* long ago. He cannot be far behind you now."

For the first time real terror came to Maynard, and he felt a jerk of shivering that was not cold. A voice in his brain said: You've been a fool. Don't be a fool any longer. Get out of this house. Hurry! Get—

But he could not prevent himself from saying, "I don't think I understand. Why can't I have that room?"

The innkeeper walked behind the bar-counter. From a stone bottle he filled two glasses with rum, and drank one greedily. Then he put his hands flat on the counter.

"Listen, monsieur. We give nobody that room; we do not dare. There is—how shall I put it—a horror there. For myself, I would not sleep there for a thousand francs. Nowadays, we call our place the Inn of the Beautiful Prospect. It used to be . . ."

The fat woman said some words to herself, which sounded to Maynard like, "the inn with the twisted doors" but he was not sure. Her husband interposed with repressed fury.

"Be quiet, fool. I do not mean *that.*" He swallowed. "Listen, monsieur. Myself, I am not a scholar like my niece Elise, and I do not know the rights of it. Many years ago—they say it was the time when the people of France made revolution against their king—this wood was a park. It belong to a fine nobleman, whose chateau was here. This man was"—he made a slight gesture—"*bad.* He practised the black arts, and they say he knew the devil. But I know he brought people here, and killed them."

"Here?"

"Our little inn, monsieur, stands on a part of the foundations of that place. It stands on what was left when they burnt it. They did

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burn it, the people. They caught this man, and what they did to him I am not sure—"

"Thou liest, my heart's desire," said the woman. "But it must have been a pretty sight. Everywhere there were bits of bone sticking up through the blood and silk and ruffles."

Maynard saw sweat on the innkeeper's forehead, and his fixed unblinking eyes. Again Maynard heard the voice whispering: Get out of here! These people are mad! Get out of here. Hurry!—

He felt his heart knocking, and he had risen with the ash stick gripped tightly, when a door opened across the room and a girl came in. She was holding another lamp, so that he saw her face clearly. He saw pink lips and dark eyes: he saw a face of such startling beauty, against the chipped oak door, that he stared. It was not a pleasant beauty. There was a quality of repose about her, as though she were always ready to smile; a force and delicacy, a poise even in the lift of her shoulder or the way she held the smoking lamp. She was coarsely dressed, in a heavy skirt and blouse open at the neck, or he might not have believed his eyes. But he knew two things: first, that she was the girl he had met on the road in the rain; and, second, that he must stay here to see her.

He was about to blurt out some remark about the road, when her eyes warned him. He caught himself in time, and said to the landlord, "I will pay you as much as you like. But I mean to have that room."

The other hesitated, breathing deeply. He pointed his finger.

"*Soit-il!*" he said with abrupt decision. "As you like! To have someone here in the house—well! Remember, you asked. And there is one thing you must promise." He turned, saw the girl, and his face changed. "Elise! Great name of the devil, what do you do here?"

She did not look at Maynard.

"I cannot stay in my room, Uncle, and I will not," she answered. "You said you would have the roof repaired, but you did not. I will bring my books here."

The innkeeper made another decision. And he seemed very anxious to keep this girl in the background. He growled something over his shoulder, took the lamp from her with a sharp gesture, and faced Maynard.

"Let monsieur follow me. Madame will prepare an omelette while monsieur is changing his clothes."

Maynard had an impulse to back out of this, but he was committed now. And his uneasiness increased as he followed the others

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upstairs. The inn was larger than he would have suspected: a hive of low passages, thick walls, and crooked-paned windows with the green damp crusted under their sills. The woodwork, he saw, was alive with black beetles which rustled and scurried as the lamplight moved. As they mounted three staircases, he noted with astonishment the fine carving of the balustrades. He mentioned this to the innkeeper; and either the sound of his voice or a sudden spatter of rain on the windows made the man jump.

"Ah!" he said, looking over his shoulder. "We are now, you understand, in the only part left standing of the old chateau. If monsieur will look closely, he will still see the scars of fire. The old Comte de Villefleur walked up these stairs every night, in his wig and bedgown. It was down these stairs that the mob dragged him, head-first, before they burnt the place. He could not walk, because most of his bones were already smashed—"

"Look out!" Maynard suddenly cried, leaping forward to seize at the lamp.

His host had missed a step and nearly pitched headforemost over the balustrade. Maynard went hot with fear, and felt his arm shaking when he steadied the man's shoulder. He heard the breath go out of the landlord's lungs like a man hit in the stomach. Slowly his host turned around with a pale wavering grin.

"I thank you, monsieur. And now listen to what I tell you. I, Paul Maillot, swear to it. There is something on this staircase now. It is crawling. I felt it pluck me by the back of the coat. Can I not prevail upon monsieur to return—"

"Lead on, damn you," said Maynard through his teeth. *"I didn't see anything."*

"But this you must promise," insisted the other. "My place is full of guests. If at any time you hear or see anything you should not, you must hurry out and call to us, eh? You promise that?"

"Steady with that lamp," Maynard said sharply. "You'll have the place afire again. Yes, I promise. Another staircase?"

They must have come to the top floor, for the noise of the storm flapped loudest now. At the end of a long corridor lined with doors they came to an oak door with a white porcelain knob, beside a projecting stone buttress. Then Maynard remembered that his guide had neglected to bring the key—but the door was open. The lamp burned as though in a gulf when they went into a high room paneled to the ceiling in oak, so that even the door and the fireplace were a part of the paneling.

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Maillot lit a couple of grimy candles, which he stuck in their own grease to the marble top of a rather fine Boule table with blackened gilt carving. They gave a little light; the forms of gilt furniture swam big and indistinct, and the bed curtains wavered in shadow. Yet, to Maynard's surprise, the place was quite clean. He looked at the windows, which were shuttered; he looked at the rotted flooring, which seemed to have been scrubbed in uneven patches. And slowly a heavy, sickly odor in the room, which might have been a disinfectant, gagged in his throat.

"Never mind a fire," said Maynard, although he was cold to the heart. "But I shall want hot water and towels. Then I will go down to dinner. Wait!" His voice went high as the innkeeper made for the door. "A question or two, my friend. Was this the room where *he* lived?"

"So they say, monsieur. At least, it was where he—disposed of his victims."

"How?"

"Nobody has ever known. Of course, he was mad."

"One more question," Maynard said. "Is it also a part of the same superstition, or is there some real thing in these woods that catches people and smashes them to death?"

Maillot cried, "Who told monsieur that?"

"A man on the road," the other lied. "Well?"

"Ah, that! What do these imbeciles know of real fears, I ask you?" He spoke contemptuously, swabbing a hand across his forehead. "One spoke there of the gully, the ravine, half a kilometer from here. Sometimes people stray off the road on dark nights, and—" He gestured. His voice rose. "Excuse me! I will go and get monsieur's hot water."

When he was alone, Maynard stared around. He flung back the red brocade curtains of the bed—suddenly, as though to surprise an intruder. Yet he saw nothing. Stripping off his wet clothes in a hurry, he took a clean blanket from the bed and wrapped himself up. He wanted to keep close to the candle flames. What had Maillot said? "A horror there." Power of suggestion! Yet why must he keep constantly whirling and looking over his shoulder?

When he rummaged through his knapsack for soap, he felt some consolation in finding his flashlight. He darted a beam round. Why was the damned place so *quiet?* If all these rooms were occupied, they must be occupied by dead men. The ugly thought grew and flowered. Above all, if they never used this room, why was it kept

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swept and polished in its decayed finery, as though to receive the eighteenth-century nobleman whose devil-house had been cleansed by fire?

He saw the candle flames reflected in the dark mirror over a bureau, and walked over to stare at his own face.

The next moment he felt his stomach turn to water, and his legs began shaking so much that he had to sit down. He shut his eyes, opened them, and peered again. It was gone. It had been no phantom; it had been suggestion. But—for just one second—he thought that he had seen another face reflected in that dark mirror as well as his own. This imaginary face had been flabby and pinkish in color. The white eyeballs were upturned, the mouth hung open, and a thin trickle of blood ran down from one corner of the mouth.

To banish these hobgoblins, he got up stiffly and paced around. Where the devil was Maillot? A sort of fury rose in him at Maillot's slowness. Maynard glanced over at the white porcelain knob of the door. He strode over, threw it open, and flashed his light up and down the corridor.

One or two of the doors in this corridor were open. His suspicions became almost certainties, but he had to know. Drawing the blanket close, he tiptoed down, pushed one door open, and flashed his light inside. It was a bedroom, empty and unused. He looked at the next—and the next.

All were empty.

And, faintly now, from downstairs, he heard a murmur that rose in a thin gust of laughter.

A hand was put on his shoulder from behind.

"Monsieur's hot water and towels," said the voice of the innkeeper, blandly. "Let me conduct monsieur back to his room."

And his fingers closed firmly round Maynard's arm.

When he got down to dinner a little while later, Maynard hoped he had himself under control. To Maillot he pretended that he had noticed nothing, and hoped that he had been believed. The consciousness of danger—and not danger from ghosts—was clear-cut now.

A silence fell on the smoky kitchen at his entrance. The fat hag still rocked before the fire. Maillot, drinking heavily out of the stone jug, leaned his elbows on the bar-counter and grinned. At one side of the fireplace sat the two peasants who earlier in the evening had directed Maynard here. The shorter one, squatted with his legs under him, was whittling a stick; his claspknife glittered by the red

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firelight, and he also grinned. The taller one, still impassive, got up and went over to bolt the door into the outer passage. Everybody laughed.

"Your comrade is nervous, Louis-Cyr," said Maillot jocosely. "He fears burglars, eh?—There is your dinner, monsieur. Good appetite!"

The squeal of mirth that went up seemed to distort their faces; Maynard saw eyes everywhere, and flourishing hands. But he steadied himself. Over in the corner he saw now the girl who had made him resolve to stay. She was regarding him calmly, over a book opened on the table, but he thought her mouth trembled. Something inside him cried wildly: Good God, *she* can't be a part of this! And all the while he was moving across casually, to a table on which they had set out a smoking omelette, a long loaf of bread, and a litre of wine. The ring of eyes grew larger.

"I have met these gentlemen before," Maynard heard himself saying. "They directed me here. It was a long, long four kilometers, my friend."

Maillot, who had been sucking at the stone jug, set it down with a thump. He pointed abruptly, and blinked reddish eyes. "So, so! It was you, then, who were indiscreet, Louis-Cyr? You mentioned something which catches and crushes—"

"Ss-st!" said the taller peasant.

"No, my faith, I did not!" declared Louis-Cyr. He stared, brushing his knife across his cheek like a razor. "I had my joke, you understand. *Ohé!* I appeal to Gerrold here! I directed monsieur to the best inn in France, and he gave me a two-franc piece."

"Ah, bah! Yes, you would accept tips," grunted Maillot, and mimicked the mincing air of a servant girl. He drank again. His fury grew. "So you did not speak of it? Then who did, I ask you? It is plain—*where are you going, Elise?*"

The girl had risen. The ring of eyes moved toward her, and Maynard felt a stab of fear.

"You asked me to get some eggs," she answered, raising her eyebrows as though in surprise. She was not flustered. "Madame used the last in making the omelette."

"Sit down," said the innkeeper. "You Louis-Cyr, you and your damned tips! Why, look there! Look at Elise. This is the first time she has set eyes on you and your kind since she was a child. Haven't I kept her at the best schools in Paris itself; hasn't Papa Maillot made her a scholar—yes, faith, and a great lady? *Enfin,* won't she

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have a tidy bit when I am dead? Come here, Elise! Come here and show yourself." He turned eagerly. "There is monsieur our guest, Elise. Speak English to him!"

"Take care, I say," growled the man called Gerrold.

Elise obeyed. She was composed and smiling; she looked significantly at all of them, winked at Louis-Cyr—who guffawed—and squeezed Maillot's arm. Her eyelids drooped in what to Maynard's fuddled wits was a horrible coquettishness as she sidled up to him. Then she spoke in English.

"Laugh," she said. "Laugh, and pretend to pay me compliments. Otherwise we are both done for. They mean to kill you. Why were you such a fool?"

He kept his head, made believe he was flirting back. "Right. What's the game? That ghost story of your uncle's—"

She looked arch. "There is no ghost, or any story of one. My uncle was pretending; he thinks he is an actor, and he likes to pretend. He does it as bait for Americans and English with money, who come alone. You are a mad people. They tell you that a room is haunted, and you will insist on sleeping there. Eh, monsieur?"

"*Vraiment, mademoiselle*—that is true—but why that room? Why all the fancy business? Can't they get me anywhere?"

She winked at the others behind her, and he took her hand. "They will not touch you, unless you try to escape. They never touch anybody. There is some mechanism in that room which—"

"Catch and crush?"

"Yes. Of itself. It caught a man last night, and I saw the body afterwards. It is the first I had heard of it. I was trying to run away tonight when I met you. I don't know what to warn you of, because I don't know what the mechanism is or how it works. It breaks—"

"Steady!"

"What does he say?" demanded Louis-Cyr eagerly.

Suddenly he saw that she was trembling beyond control, that her lips moved and jerked without sound. He saw her wavering, her glazed eyes squeezing shut.

"*What does he say?*" Gerrold repeated, very softly. In the midst of an abrupt silence he yanked the poker out of the fire and stood up.

"I say," cried Maynard in French, "that mademoiselle is the most beautiful, the most—" He lunged out, grinning foolishly, and made a clumsy play of seizing her in his arms. The rest of his sentence was lost in the roar of laughter that exploded from all of them.

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"Oh, that!" said Gerrold, and flung down the poker.

The wing of terror brushed and passed. Flushed, she drew away from him with an air of chiding delicacy.

"Come, monsieur! Truly, that is too much!" She changed quickly into English. *"Don't let them suspect you know. Go to the room tonight, but don't touch anything or go near anything."* Then in French she said, "I am sure, Uncle Paul, you will excuse me now of my duties." She gave him a brilliant smile, and paused at the door. "A very good night, monsieur; sleep well. *You must try to hang on until I return. I am going for the police."*

She was halfway to the door when the immense woman by the fire stirred. She peered around under her grimy shawl. Getting up with a heavy wheeze, she waddled towards Elise.

"Ah, now, there, my dearest!" she urged. "That is very well, but first you must take off poor old Tante Marie's shoes, eh? I am tired, Paul. Good night."

And, as she grinned and thumped past Maillot, she spoke in such a low voice that ordinarily Maynard would never have heard her: "You are stupid, my heart's desire. I know no English, but the word 'police' is like ours. . . . Come along, dearest Elise! Come along! Be sure that your old Tante Marie will attend to you."

She towered over Elise, clucking, and Maynard saw the brownish stains on her own apron. The door closed after them.

He could do nothing, Maynard realized—that was the baffling and maddening thing. The trap had caught the girl as well. If he provoked open war now, he could not help her and it might mean certain death for both of them. A fool's face was the only chance—a fool's face and an outwitting.

He stood gripping the edge of the table, smiling fatuously. Didn't they suspect he knew? It was an even chance—and, if so, why didn't the pack close in and tear his throat out? Why bother with their crushing mechanism, whatever it was? Unless they enjoyed the view of the fool in the mousetrap, pattering round until it snapped his neck; or unless—

The ugly answer came to him as he saw them laughing and wagging their heads before the fire. Maillot had mentioned a gully or ravine near here, over which lost travelers had gone to death on rocks. They were not lost travelers. Maynard knew now what had happened to them. Kill a man with knife, gun, poison, and you have the police at your heels. But smash him in some clever snare, place his body at the foot of a ravine on a rainy night, and you have

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nothing but the accidental death of a careless, probably drunken, tourist.

Through a mist he heard the innkeeper speaking. "Come, monsieur must drink some wine!" he urged. "And eat before the food grows cold, eh? There is good cognac to follow. As for you others—"

"Cognac and a hand at cards," crowed Louis-Cyr, jingling his pocket. "There is plenty here: plenty. You play, monsieur?"

Maynard ate a mouthful, although it choked him. "Not tonight, unfortunately. You see, my friend is carrying all my money. But then I expect him here tonight, so M. Maillot need not worry about his bill."

He felt the silence after this double-barreled bluff. Then he saw Maillot smirking. Maillot was amiably drunk now.

"Eh, but monsieur is cautious about play! When he offered me any amount to sleep in my haunted room, he displayed a well-filled wallet."

"If I offer—" said Maynard, and stopped. He could offer nothing. Doing so would not help a determined, rebellious girl, nor would it help him; it would only show that he knew too much. He shut his teeth hard.

"And this friend of yours?" Louis-Cyr suggested silkily.

"Go to hell," said Maynard, with calm suddenness. He drained a glass of wine and sat back amid an explosion of laughter.

"I begin to think, really, that our guest does not trust us," said Maillot, shuffling a pack of cards. "Yet he shall go up to his room when he likes, and lock himself in. That is fair, eh?"

The minutes dragged, and the storm did not decrease. Fair! With every tick of the clock the time came nearer when he must go upstairs to face that unknown trap that caught and crushed. Where was it! What was it? The room had seemed harmless enough. It must be something that worked by itself, like a live thing. Somehow, he had to outwit it and find a way to Elise. For of one thing he was now sure: it was not merely for a franc or two that these men played murder in good earnest. They were out here where the ghosts and hobgoblins had crept into their brains; they liked to spring their trap, and their most unholy mirth was derived from it.

Maynard thought he couldn't stand it any longer. He sprang up.

"I will go to my room, if you don't mind," he said, "and see whether the Comte de Villefleur will pay me a visit tonight."

Maillot sprang up. "I will accompany monsieur. Come along, Gerrold, and carry the lamp."

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"And if the Comte de Villefleur really is here—".

"Our ghost? *Hé, hé,* yes," chuckled Maillot. But he looked a little pale nevertheless. What, thought Maynard, was the good of acting now?

There was no chance for a blow or an escape. They were on either side of him, and just behind, and he saw that Gerrold had a knife. Yet when they went up those windy staircases, amid the rattle of windows, once the innkeeper clutched at Maynard's coat. Even Gerrold didn't look so stolid when they came into the room.

Nothing—nothing yet. Gerrold relit the candles, while Maynard stared round and Maillot stood with his back to the door. Now Maynard did not want to be alone. The shadows swayed with monstrous concealments, the red curtains seemed to grow larger; and, without warning, Maillot screamed.

"It looked out from the bed curtains," he said, and pointed. "I saw it just then."

Maynard's rage flared uppermost. He flung the man back against the wall and pinned him by the throat. He spoke in English, heavily, because all French had fled his wits. Then he heard himself yelling.

"Now, then, we'll stop this filthy pretending if I have to strangle you here and now. Let's have it out, shall we? If—"

He stopped. He held one of Maillot's limp wrists against the wall; and there was barely a pulse beating. He saw a bitten tongue and staring eyes. The man was not pretending.

"Shall I . . . ?" breathed Gerrold. Maynard heard the click of a claspknife. The innkeeper's eyes came into focus. He was wheezing.

"No, my child. No. We will leave him to the Comte de Villefleur."

He wrenched himself free, grinning out of a mottled face. Inserting the key in an almost invisible keyhole, he locked the door.

"We, monsieur," he explained shakily, "we will get out by another door—behind that hanging over there. I have no desire to go down those front stairs again. But monsieur need not worry about our exit. He can lock *that* door too."

Raising a tapestry in the far wall, he disclosed a door with heavy bolts. He and Gerrold were out of it before Maynard could speak; Maynard fell against it, shot the bolts behind them, and stood for a second motionless with his head down.

Steady! Pull yourself together! The thing that catches and crushes will be here now, if it is anywhere. They were right in one thing: this door was solid, as he proved by examining it and testing the bolts. He went to the other door, which was also locked and solid.

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Nobody could get in, then. Whatever it was must be here in the room with him.

With his back to the wall he studied the place, until he remembered that he must touch nothing. There was a leprous look about it, as though fungus would come off in his fingers. If he could find out where Elise was—

Then he suddenly thought of the windows. He laid hold of the shutters, and with a savage wrench opened the bar that held them. Outside was dusty glass; and beyond it iron bars. But he had been warned not to touch anything! Again he remembered it, backing away.

Then one of the candles on the table went out.

He had forgotten that. They were both stumps, carefully given him, and both almost burned to flat masses of grease. The other would not last much longer. He had his flashlight; but there was a horror in the thought of pressing darkness. If he could—

Steady! He felt that he must be losing his wits. Were they so confident that their mechanism would get him that they had not locked the doors on the outside? If they had not, and he could get out into the house unobserved, it was his best chance.

The second and last of the candles went out in a puff. Darkness was like strangling water here; the thought of what Maillot might have seen looking out from the bed curtains nearly brought on panic. But he groped over quickly to his knapsack and took out the flashlight. One brief flash showed him the porcelain knob. He twisted the key, and, with a kind of profane prayer, pulled. The door was not locked on the outside.

He stepped out into the corridor, and nearly smashed headforemost to his death. Maynard heard himself screaming.

There was no corridor there at all, and no floor. He stepped forward into nothing with his hand still on the knob of the door, and that saved him from falling immediately. He felt himself reeling when nothing met his foot. He swayed on a hair-tread, sick in the stomach, and slid down on one knee while he still gripped the knob. He thought, now, that he could not get back. Still overbalanced, if the strength went out of that hand he would go down. He cried his profane prayer aloud; swayed again, and with slow wrenches forced himself to tumble back inside the room.

After an interval he shakily got out his flashlight. The sickness and dizziness had passed, but he could not believe what he saw. The corridor had vanished—and in its place was only a stone-walled

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room perhaps ten feet square, and without a door. He turned the light downwards. It did not go to the depths, sixty feet or more, but he thought he could discern rocks in the steamy mist at the foot, and a pulpy mass spreadeagled there. He smelled something, too.

Now, this was madness, unless—

Wait a bit! Just outside this room, he remembered, there had been an immense stone projection beside the door. Well? And the door was set so closely into the oak panels that you could see where it was only by the *white* knob. His brain bursting, he moved the beam of light along the wall.

Yes. Just beside this door he had opened on the pit, there was another keyhole and another spindle for a knob. There were two doors, set side by side: one to the corridor and one to the pit beside it. To set the trap, *you had only to shift the knob from one spindle to the other,* a few inches, as Maillot had done while his confederate had been lighting the candles. Then they started, say, a fire-scare, and let the victim kill himself. But in his case they had only to wait; for they knew he was frightened and would try to escape.

The Inn with the Twisted Door . . .

"Thing that catches—" Maynard said aloud, and froze. He could hear a movement out in the real corridor, and stealthy footfalls. It came back to him with a shock of realization that he had cried out when he lost his balance. They had heard him. They were coming to see the result.

There was only one way out now. It might work. He'd get behind the real door when they came in, then slip out into the corridor when they went to look for a crushed pulp at the bottom; and he'd try to find Elise.

A lock clicked, and the real door began to open almost in his face. Still sitting on the floor, Maynard twisted frantically to one side, and rolled behind as the door brushed within an inch of his fingers. The glow of a lamp showed in the aperture. He heard voices muttering, a smack of laughter that he identified as Tante Marie's. But he did not dare look.

"He is down, my heart's desire?" asked Tante Marie.

"He is down," said Maillot shakily. "Ah, God, that *swine!* We can rejoice. Lou, Louis-Cyr! You, Gerrold! Go down into the cellars and see what he has in his pockets."

Tante Marie said, "Let us look. It will be pretty, but it is good also. The little Elise liked him. She would betray us for him. She wept, until I smashed in her mouth and beat her to submission.

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Thou art sure he is finished, my husband?"

"Nothing ever comes up out of that pit," said Maillot. He repeated: "Nothing ever—" and stopped.

There was such a dead silence that Maynard could hear them breathing. Then a wild, long, queer, whimpering noise, like the cry of a beaten dog, began to bubble through Maillot's lips. It rose. "No!" cried Tante Marie. "No, no, no. Not me too. Not me. Go back. Go back!"

"Mercy," said Maillot. "Mercy on me, in His Name. Oh, in His Name—"

The lamplight jumped and vanished, and Maynard heard a muffled crash. Above it he heard Louis-Cyr and Gerrold crying something. He heard the thud of their feet as they ran down the corridor in a black terror that made them wail louder than the two by the pit. A scuffling, sobbing noise beat in the darkness, as though fighting people were being dragged somewhere.

Maynard risked a flash of his light. He saw two figures, Maillot and Tante Marie, on the edge of the pit. Before them was a third figure, which he could not see distinctly; but it was crumpled like a laundry bag, and had bits of bone sticking through ruffles and silk of an ancient bedgown, and a once white wig that was blood-matted. He saw also a pinkish flabby face whose eyes were now wide-open in a stare of the dead, and the thing had its broken arms around them.

There was a moment's scuffle and screaming. Then the mouth of the pit was empty. He heard the thud from the rocks below.

The police *commissaire,* in dull light that struggled through broken shutters at dawn, stood with his notebook at attention.

"Deceased," he repeated formally, "Paul Descartes Maillot, 55, and Marie Agnes Maillot, 52. Injuries—h'm." He cleared his throat, and looked at Elise, who sat very pale in the kitchen, a handkerchief over her bruised mouth and Maynard's arm round her shoulder. "Of course you understand, mademoiselle," he continued with a trace of awkwardness, "it is better so. It would have been necessary to . . . well, we have caught the men, Louis-Cyr Fley and Gerrold Cocteau, and you may safely wager that their heads will go into the guillotine basket."

"How can I have sympathy?" she asked quietly. "I never knew—them. He used my mother's money, and boasted of educating me. He—"

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"Ah, *ça!*" muttered the *commissaire,* and the girl's eyes brimmed over. He shifted uncomfortably. "Doubtless Monsieur Maynard will—but back to our sheep. There is just one thing, you see, which will not quite square with our police records, or our common sense."

"Yes?" said Maynard.

"Not that I would doubt your word, you perceive! But when the two bodies were picked up, a third figure was found . . . A figure that looked very much like the old Comte de Villefleur who was killed there a century and a half ago . . ."

"I see!"

"No, no, Monsieur Maynard misunderstands. I said 'figure.' For we all know the dead stay dead." He spread out his hands. "Mme. Maillot, when she came upstairs, was carrying with her—a scarecrow: very shapeless in its old garments, and doubtless she wished to take Monsieur Maynard's garments for it. The *commissaire* cleared his throat, smiled faintly. "When the two miscreants missed a step and fell to accidental death, it was doubtless this scarecrow which constituted the third figure that M. Maynard saw. We agree it was a scarecrow?"

"Doubtless," said Maynard firmly, though he had been there and seen and knew that he could never believe.

They all looked at each other. Elise shrank inside Maynard's arm. The police *commissaire* bowed very low.

"That is wise, my friend. We are sensible, in France," he said.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 526th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The author, C. Rowell, inherited a diary written by a Miss Stanley in 1871 and 1872, and the diary inspired Mrs. Rowell's first attempt at fiction. Her story has the tone and flavor of a late-Nineteenth Century diary . . .

Mrs. Rowell was sixty-nine when she submitted her first story. She has "two grown children and five 'grands.'" Her hobbies are reading, entering contests, and boating with her husband.

Sixty-nine . . . now, that should be enormously encouraging to all new writers, old and young . . .

SUMMER OF 1872

by C. ROWELL

My wife and I came across an old diary as we cleaned out the attic last spring. It belonged to the late Ed Trang who clerked for the old Philadelphia *Ledger* in the 1870's and before, except for a few years of soldiering in the Civil War. Dad told me of a once-upon-a-time Uncle Ed and how he'd been chosen by the late-great editor, G. W. Childs, to become part of his summer family in the year 1872. Ed was a bachelor, about 47 years old, and could sing and play the piano rather well.

Since Ed is long gone, I think it's time someone besides my wife and I knew of his contribution to President Grant and our country. So let's look into his diary.

June 21, 1872. Long Branch.

After 47 Philadelphia summers, 25 of them spent working in hot, sticky heat, Long Branch is Paradise. It is cool, clean, sunny and bright. Beds of white peonies greeted me. The Childses are secluded in pine trees and have their own private beach. The house is large and comfortable, with many porches.

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To-day Mrs. Childs asked permission to show my bachelor quarters to our neighbors (also in a 2½-story house in the pines with a beach adjoining ours)—Mr. & Mrs. U. S. Grant.

June 23. Tea.

The President and Mrs. Grant dropped in. Young Trevor Dent (probably a 42nd cousin of Mrs. G.'s) was with them. I saw Trevor on the beach just before noon, walking the Grants' dogs. Miss Stansbury, whose usefulness here somewhat parallels mine, was present. She is an attractive woman in her late thirties.

Everyone remarked on my striking resemblance to Mr. Grant. I say this without vanity—I am more erect, but we are both blue-eyed and bearded. Our hair is worn in the same fashion and is a chestnut-brown color. I hope I look neater in my summer broadcloths than he.

President Grant told of a woman who reproached him so loudly that all in earshot heard it. We laughed.

But, dear diary, I know from some of the opposition newspapers that he has many political enemies, especially so now, with election near. *The World* charged the Grants with nepotism, preference for rich and military friends, scores of visiting relatives and their children at government expense and use of the revenue-cutter and S.S. Baltic for personal reasons.

Evening of Monday. June 25.

Went next door in the rain with Mr. and Mrs. Childs and Miss Stansbury. Trevor had the dogs in the sitting-room. Mrs. C. got too near the fighting dogs and got scratched. I helped Trevor separate them and took them to their kennel near the men's bath-house. Later, Mr. Grant commended me on the way I had handled them.

Only Miss Stansbury got slightly hysterical over Mrs. Childs' injuries. I was able to comfort her about it. She has a fear of dogs. Miss S. is wearing a soft-blue silk dress trimmed with dark-blue braid which matches her hair and eyes. When upset, her eyes look like a deep pool in a shady glen.

Later, Miss Stansbury and I obliged with a piano-duet and some songs. At the late-hour buffet (11 P.M.) a Mr. Joshua Clay of Louisiana was especially attentive to Miss S. and escorted her home. He is 40 or more and insipidly blond.

Tues. June 26.

What a nightmare of a day! It started early this A.M. with the President, not Trevor, walking the dogs. Mr. C. and I were walking on the beach, too, and we met. Mr. Grant asked if I would continue

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his chore for him and walk the dogs. Trevor was down with a cold. He being my former commander and now my President, I assented. Mr. Grant and my employer strolled towards the summer-house.

It was some ten minutes later, when I felt a damp, ill-smelling 'kerchief over my nose and mouth. The dogs never barked as I remember. Sometime later, Mr. Childs found me wandering aimlessly in the little wooded area near the Childs house—the dogs had found their way home alone. I told him the strange tale.

Wednesday. June 27.

I am fully recovered from my frightening experience. Only Mr. C. knows what happened. Last night was not much better. We were awakened from our slumbers by an intruder. I say, "intruder," rather than burglar, because nothing was stolen. Outside it was eerie, too, with constant rain and a moaning sea. The intruder eluded us but in case of return, we armed ourselves with carving knives and the ladies with dinner-bells. Maybe my nerves are worse than I imagine, but I wondered if an assassin had stumbled into the wrong house. Was someone out to kill the President?

Afternoon.

I took the ladies bathing—that is, Mrs. Childs and Miss Stansbury. They tired after half an hour of it. I asked if I might escort them home and if I could return and do a little swimming alone. They agreed, but decided to sit on the beach as the Grants might come over later. Our beach is more popular with the adults. The children and their nurses use the Grants' beach more often.

I had a good swim and was swimming back when I felt someone sitting on my head, pulling me under—or was it the undertow? I felt helpless. Just as suddenly I was pulled to my feet by Mr. Joshua Clay. He mumbled something about the strong "undertow." About the same time I saw the President and Mrs. Grant on the beach. I hated to mention the incident to Mr. Grant but felt I must. He said he'd hire an investigator.

Thursday. June 28. Foggy and sultry.
Tea.

Mrs. (Gen'l) Porter, Jesse Grant (youngest son) who likes to hunt, Trevor, the President and his wife, Joshua Clay, Miss Stansbury, and Mr. & Mrs. Childs and children.

The children seem to like Jesse and Trevor.

Mr. Childs mentioned our burglar. He amused all of us by telling of our plan to foil the intruder if he reappeared.

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The subject of lightning rods was brought up. Mrs. Childs said that she felt safer without one. All the ladies agreed. Trevor winked. Later, he told me that Joshua Clay had been the intruder. He had come home from the village late and slightly drunk. Since he was new to Long Branch, he had gotten into the wrong house.

Joshua himself was busy confiding in Miss S. She is intrigued with his Southern accent.

July 6, 1872. Land breeze.

Exciting day. I was included in the Presidential party. We are seeing Buck Grant off on the S.S. Baltic. Also Miss Sallie and Mae Drexel and their Father. In the party are the President's sister, Virginia, Mr. Lippincott, Mrs. Porter, Trevor, Mr. Clay, Miss Stansbury, Mr. & Mrs. Childs, and Jesse G.

From Mr. L.'s private yacht we went aboard the U.S. revenue-cutter. There, we found a sumptuous feast prepared for us. President Grant escorted Mrs. Childs. I followed at the tail end with Miss Stansbury. Afterwards, we got apart somehow and I saw her with Mr. Clay.

Trevor and I had struck up a friendship of sorts. He told me Mr. Clay was a Southern sympathizer but had never fought on the rebel side—he was a draft-dodger. He also confided in me about how much he'd miss the Drexel girls. As we steamed down the bay to the Baltic, some of the crowd on the deck of the steamship mistook me for the President. They pointed at me and cheered. Then the great man himself came on deck and gun-salutes followed.

On the Baltic, we said our good-byes to Buck and then to Mr. Drexel and his pretty girls.

Back to the cutter and the yacht. As we neared land, we took our cue from Mr. L. and wore our handkerchiefs like bandits, covering nose and mouth from the sting of vicious mosquitoes. It made me shiver as I remembered the drugged handkerchief of last month. I wondered where was the detective Mr. Grant had hired? So far he had done nothing, or was he the tall man who seemed to be following the President to-day?

Early Morn. July 7.

Still excited after my big day and unable to sleep. Also scratching my mosquito bites.

Thought I saw someone moving about in the summer-house shared by both houses. It is vine-covered and difficult to see in this early light. There is a breeze blowing from the ocean side. But why would anyone be in the summer-house at this hour?

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July 10.

Long Branch is more beautiful than ever. Pink and blue hydrangeas bloom in profusion from one end of Ocean Avenue to the other.

Miss Stansbury and I are busy practising piano-duets and songs for Mrs. Childs' Musicale to-night.

The Musicale was a success. Some of the smoking guests retired to the summer-house and forgot to return till midnight buffet was served.

Miss S. performed well but Mr. Clay flattered her most outrageously.

Sunday, July 14. Warm.

Church—went in the Biddles' carriage.

Noon—watched Trevor playing with the dogs on the beach.

After lunch, or I should say Sunday dinner of 7 courses, Mr. Childs asked me if I wanted to walk some of it off with him. Later, we found our way to Mr. Grant's porch. We had discussed the coming election and his press-enemies. He said he wanted to talk to Grant privately and would like to get him into the house. The detective said that he expected another attack on Mr. Grant's life. If the detective covered me, would I be willing to sit on Grant's porch for an hour or so? Most people knew President Grant sat and sometimes dozed on a Sunday afternoon there on the porch. Mr. C. said that of course, there would be some danger as Mr. Grant would make an easy target of himself in that position. I agreed, but I admit I was more than frightened.

Mr. Grant was sitting there slouched over and smoking one of his many cigars. He seemed to be alone on the porch. There were several empty rocking-chairs and a standing sewing-basket on the quiet porch. Almost instantly we filled the chairs.

I pointed out someone in the summer-house. Mr. Grant thought it was a reporter. He told us both as we smoked cigars with him that the summer before he'd been followed night and day by a reporter from the *Herald*.

Mr. Childs finally managed to get Grant inside, but not before he excused himself. I watched the summer-house. Coming from it was what looked like a strange creature, indeed, until I realized it was someone in a bee-keeper's costume. He was coming towards me. Someone behind me said, "Duck, Ed." I toppled my chair over until it hit the railing. A bullet whizzed over the back of the chair. I saw bare feet beneath the bee-keeper's coat. They ran towards the Childs house.

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Soon I heard dogs and saw Trevor leading them up to the porch railing. I told him what happened. After finding myself in one piece, I followed Trevor and the dogs.

The dogs led us to the beach and there we found Joshua Clay bathing by himself. Not even a child was on the beach.

"Mr. Clay probably threw the gun and outfit in the sea," I told Trevor. He agreed.

"I'd go in after him if I could swim," Trevor told me.

"No use." Then I added, "The outfit might wash up when the tide changes."

"About dawn," Trevor counseled. "See you then."

After supper.

Mr. Childs thanked me for what I'd done. The investigator had found the bullet in the sewing-basket. I told him what Trevor and I had decided.

"Since you've told Trevor, you'll have to go through with it. I'll see that you're covered."

"Surely, you don't suspect Trevor?"

"I suspect everyone."

Dawn (written July 15)

Trevor reached the beach before me. He had the dogs with him and they all looked liked brown silhouettes in the early light.

When I reached Trevor, he showed me where the bee-keeper's hat and coat had washed up. It looked as though someone had wrung them out. There was no gun.

"Looks like I've found enough to make a case against Clay," he told me. I noticed he wore a brown bathing suit and that his feet were sandy and wet.

"Fine," I told him, adding, "Doesn't make me sorry."

Mr. Childs came up behind Trevor and said, "Except for one thing, fellows. This outfit wasn't washed up, Trevor. You put it there."

"You saw me?"

"Three of us saw you."

"I'll deny it."

"You deny the gun we found in the shrubbery?"

Mr. Childs went on to tell how Trevor had tied the dogs and hid his shoes before entering the summer-house, how he'd left Mr. Grant after firing the derringer, put on his pants, shirt and shoes, untied the dogs and returned to see if he'd made a hit.

"Why did you try to do this to someone who has been so good to you?"

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"My Uncle was with General Rosecrans in the War. The General was relieved of his command by Grant because the Union Army was starving on its feet at Chattanooga. Rosecrans had put a plan in effect that would open up the river. Grant stepped in and took credit for the plan. Uncle was skipped over for promotion, after that. In post-war days Uncle was ignored when the Grants gave other family members political plums. I decided to right the wrong."

"Your Uncle didn't get all his facts straight," Mr. Childs told Trevor.

"Don't move or I'll put the dogs on you," Trevor warned, taking the dogs and running into the water.

The detective appeared and ran after Trevor. His shots missed him.

"It's all over," I said. "He can't swim."

The dogs turned and started for us.

"Don't worry, I'll shoot them," the detective told Mr. Childs.

"Let me try another way," I said.

"Try."

I called the dogs to me by name and petted them, making sure to give each the same amount of affection. Then I led them back to their kennel.

Saturday. July 20.

Quiet sad week—with one exception. Joshua Clay has decided to go home. He told one of the Dents that he could have more fun back in Feliciana Parish. Up here he had to hide his bourbon in the summer-house. Maybe that's the moving figure I saw at early dawn?

Miss Stansbury looks grief-stricken. I don't think it's over Trevor's "early-morning drowning," as the newspaper called it.

From my room I'm privileged to see President Grant exercising his dogs. I find it safer to stay here with you, dear diary.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 527th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an imaginative debut in print (the scene will persist in your mind), with little "stories" within stories . . .

The author, Richard Grant, was twenty-nine when he submitted his first fiction. He was born and raised in Hastings-on-Hudson, went to Penn State, and now lives in Denver. For two years he was an Information Specialist for the Colorado Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, and now works part-time for the Classified Department of "The Denver Post."

His interests include backpacking, mountain climbing, and model railroading, and he has sold nonfiction, mainly outdoor, nature and history articles . . .

MR. PIKE'S HOBBY

by RICHARD GRANT

The express was highballing—roaring past Pikeville Station without even slowing down. On the station platform a dozen figures stared woodenly at the 30-car freight train rushing past. A little dust by the side of the tracks swirled in circles. The engine let loose a long mournful whistle, curved past the freight yards, crossed a small steel bridge, passed a farm where a man on a tractor was pausing to wave, then rounded a bend and headed for the mountains.

"The whistle's amazing," McPherson said. "How is it done?"

Pike smiled for the first time that evening. "There's a miniature receiver in the locomotive. The transformer broadcasts the sound and it's played back through a small speaker in the bottom of the tender."

Another blast came from the train, which was now snaking its way through the mountains, past a mining operation, over steep evergreen-covered hills toward a trestle that would send it hurtling into a tunnel.

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McPherson shook his head. "It's hard to believe you built this by yourself. Must have taken you years."

Pike shrugged. "It's like anything else. You start with a little and slowly add on. I never imagined it would get this large when I started. It just becomes more and more complex—almost on its own."

"Yes," McPherson said. "I had a case like that once." He took another look at the miniature world filling every square inch of space in the basement and said, "I'm surprised your wife was taking a bus. I would have thought that with all this she'd be more inclined to travel by train."

Pike gave a hollow laugh. He was a short man in his early sixties with fine white hair. "I guess you younger people don't travel by anything but car or plane. There hasn't been any decent passenger service out of here in six years. Oh, a few AMTRAK trains go through town, but my wife wasn't especially fond of trains. She liked the bus."

"Really?" McPherson said. He slid down the maze that ran through the center of the layout, a tiny passageway that let one get into the scenery either to look at it more closely or to work on it. On his right were the mountains and the industrial areas, on his left the freight yards and the sprawling city of Pikeville, population 3,000, as indicated on a small sign by the tracks.

Most of the residents seemed to be out on the streets, shopping in the downtown stores or attending a small traveling circus perched on the outskirts of town. The detail was incredible. McPherson was studying a small farmhouse when suddenly he let out a sharp cry. "Is this what I think—" he started to say, and turned to see Pike laughing.

McPherson turned back to the farmhouse. A tiny figure of a man was walking up the porch steps at the front of the house; in the back a man naked except for a towel was bursting through the back door while a scantily clad woman was shouting to him from a second-story window.

"A lot of this work gets pretty tedious," Pike said. "So you break it up by adding a little humor. There are dozens of little 'stories' like the farmhouse there, scattered throughout the city."

"Incredible. What are some of the others?"

Pike pointed to a gas station. "There's one a police detective like you might be interested in."

McPherson looked at Pike quickly, then followed his finger. At first he didn't see it. It was an old-fashioned station with a car

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parked by the gas pumps and a wrecking car and a few junkers sitting in the back lot. There were several figures standing around. He looked closer and saw that two of the tiny men were wearing masks and one was pointing a gun at a third.

Bending down to get an eye-level view, he could see inside the service station where another gas jockey had his hands in the air, while a masked man was looking at the cash register. "Amazing," he said. "And pretty realistic. You could drive right by that station and not know there was a holdup in progress."

"Yes, but don't forget Miss Friggett."

"Miss Friggett?"

Pike pointed across the miniature street to a small yellow house. On the balcony a thin old woman was talking into a telephone and looking through binoculars at the gas station across the way. McPherson smiled, and then saw the police car. It was two blocks away, taking a corner on two wheels. Even though it was frozen on the street, it seemed to be doing 60.

"Help is on the way," McPherson said, and shrugged. "I wish it was always that simple, Mr. Pike, but the truth is, it's not. Frankly, we have no idea what has happened to your wife, other than the amnesia theory we discussed."

The look of contentment on Pike's face as he gazed at his model railroad vanished. "Do you really think that's a possibility?"

"What else is there? Two weeks ago you left your wife at the bus stop at 7:15. She was to board a 7:30 bus that would take her to Spring City. Her sister met the bus in Spring City and your wife wasn't on it. The bus driver insists he never saw her. No one at the bus station remembers seeing her. She just vanished from the moment she left your car."

"I should have gone in with her, but my ulcer was acting up. I was barely able to drive the car."

McPherson nodded. They'd gone over this a half dozen times upstairs. He'd been glad when Pike offered to show him his model railroad—anything to get away from the case even for a few minutes. But it couldn't be put off forever. Something had happened to Mrs. Pike, and it was McPherson's job to find out what.

"What we figure is that somehow your wife must have become disoriented, lost her memory. If she'd boarded another bus by mistake, she would surely have contacted you by now."

"You've ruled out kidnaping then?" Pike said with no expression.

"Yes." McPherson had never really considered it. Mrs. Pike was

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in her late 50's. A simple middle-class woman who, judging by her photographs, was not even particularly attractive. She was unemployed, certainly had no boy friends on the side, lived a quiet life, and had simply vanished into thin air at 7:15 two weeks ago. Outside of the amnesia explanation there was only one possibility—that Pike had murdered her and disposed of the body.

McPherson looked at the little old man who was busy righting a tree that had fallen over, and dismissed the idea of murder. He was starting to inch his way back through the maze when he froze. There, on the corner of the two main streets in Pikeville, under a sign that said BUS STOP, was an older woman, sitting by herself, wearing a purple dress. Mrs. Pike had been wearing a purple dress when she disappeared.

The detective felt his heart beat a little faster as he scanned the streets looking for more of Pike's little "stories." He found the next one down at the freight yards. It was horrible. In a back alley, next to an abandoned warehouse, a group of men were standing around staring at some object. At first he couldn't make it out. Then his mind refused to accept it. The object was a man dangling from the end of a rope around his neck. And the little men around him weren't just standing there, they were leering at the body, taunting it, throwing rocks at it. It was a lynching party.

McPherson swung around to look at Pike, but the old man was busy on the far side of the layout, working on some little scene in the mountains.

McPherson returned his attention to the city. There were lots of "stories" now. You wouldn't notice them at first glance because the layout was so huge. It reminded him of a picture in his high-school yearbook—three hundred smiling faces, three hundred bodies, members of the senior class standing on the front steps of the high school. You could look at the picture a long time before you found the one clown subtly giving the photographer an obscene gesture.

It was the same with this model railroad layout. You could stare at it and see nothing but trains and buildings and plaster of Paris scenery. But if you looked hard, there were "stories" there. Plenty of them. A dog running down the street with a smaller animal between its jaws; a woman silhouetted in a window, frozen forever in the act of sticking a knife into a man's back; another woman with wild hair, poised on the edge of a roof, ready to jump; a young boy with a baseball glove, ricocheting off a car bumper, the black skid marks on the road telling the story.

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McPherson passed over them all, the bodies floating face down in swimming pools, the crimes in the alley ways, the muggings on the streets, but always he came back to one haunting image. It was a house almost identical to Pike's. In the back yard there was a brick barbecue similar to the one he had seen on a previous visit to the house. And sticking out of the fire grate were a pair of tiny white legs, covered by a shred of purple dress.

Pike cleared his throat, and McPherson felt himself jump involuntarily.

"I see you've discovered my macabre sense of humor."

"Is that what you call it?"

The old man shrugged.

"Mr. Pike, I'll want to examine the barbecue in your back yard."

"Yes," he said, smiling, "I suppose you will."

The train went through a crossing and let loose a long eerie whistle. "That's the Pikeville Southern. It's running on schedule now. One of my hardest problems was getting it on a siding while—"

"Why, Mr. Pike? Why did you do it?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might."

The old man sighed and went back to work on the mountains. "You can't see the damage now, but she threw a brick into the industrial area. Right over there. I, ah—I lost control. It happened rather fast. She said I spent too much time down here. Perhaps she was right."

McPherson slowly made his way through the maze leading toward the old man.

"Do you think I'll be able to make bail?"

"I wouldn't know that, sir."

"It's important that I finish the schedule. I have the Pikeville Southern running on time, but I must rearrange the five o'clock freight."

"Uh-huh."

"It's very important to me."

McPherson threaded his way through the layout, trying to imagine the poor man sitting home alone, painstakingly carving those horrible little figures, painting them, placing them together to form nightmarish scenes. Doubtlessly he was crazy, but that wouldn't matter much. Not to Mr. Pike. Whatever institution he ended up in, they would take his railroad away, and in so doing, take away his purpose in life. McPherson couldn't bear to look at him, so he

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looked at the scene in the mountains that Pike had just been working on.

It was thick evergreen forest. In a small clearing an old man with white hair stood leaning on a shovel. Next to him was a shallow grave. McPherson felt his stomach muscles contract. Beside the grave was a rumpled form—the body of a man wearing a grayish-green suit.

McPherson didn't have to look at himself to realize he was wearing a grayish-green suit. He was too busy to do so; all his attention was focused on the revolver in Mr. Pike's hands.

AN IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS

On August 27, 1979 the mailing house responsible for shipping subscriber copies of EQMM unfortunately experienced a fire which gutted the facility as well as destroying literally thousands of subscriber copies earmarked for mailing.

Although we are going back to press to accommodate both renewing and new subscribers who will receive September and/or October issues, there will be a slight delay in delivery.

Less than 3,000 late renewing subscribers were to have received the August 1979 issue, but unfortunately these cannot be replaced. This group will have subscriptions extended one issue.

A very small number of August issues is available from our New York office for any subscribers who collect complete sets.

Joel Davis, Publisher

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 528th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Here are some titles the author considered for his first story: "Free Parking"; "Go Directly to Jail"; "Do Not Pass GO"; "A Toss of the Dice"; "The Rattle of Distant Dice." Get the idea? Now read it, as told in a kind of hardboiled style . . . "You know how things are in this town sometimes. You're never sure what's going on" . . .

The author, Gary Eberle, was born in Toledo, Ohio, but has spent the last ten years in Detroit earning various degrees at the University of Detroit. In those ten years Gary Eberle has also "held a number of jobs ranging from truck driver to wandering minstrel (really) at an annual Renaissance festival." For the past two years he has been a weekly columnist for the "Medical Center News in Detroit," writing a column called "Magic, Myth and Medicine," which focuses on offbeat incidents in the history of medicine. (Is it surprising that the author's first story is so offbeat?) . . .

THE NAME OF THE GAME

by GARY EBERLE

The guy on the phone told me it was a wandering hubby case, but the price he offered woke me up faster than a snort of coffee—a thousand bucks now and another thou later.

Times were way too tough to pass up that kind of dough, so I climbed into my old beat-up shoe and hopped over to the Connecticut Avenue address he'd given me. It was early Monday, with the Electric Company billowing smoke into the air and the Water Works dumping raw sewage into the river. I stopped at GO and picked up 200 bucks just to get started.

The Connecticut Avenue address was a vacant lot. A guy who

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could have belonged to the voice on the phone sat in a late-model flatiron in front of it.

I put my foot on the running board of the flatiron.

"Story time," I said. "I'm McGinty."

The guy had a home-grown New Jersey accent. "I'm gonna say this once: it's worth two thousand simoleons to someone if you get the goods on a certain government bigwig name of McGuire who's pulling a fast one on his wife."

"McGuire's the name of the mayor, sonny. I'd sure hate to be the one to put a choker on him. The police chief might not like that and I'd probably find myself under the Boardwalk some morning chained to a pile waiting for the high tide."

"Not to worry," said the kid. "The mayor's wife is the police chief's daughter."

He held two crisp five hundreds, gold and new, out of the window of the flatiron. "Shall we say you have a new client?"

This guy was as oily as cheap Italian dressing, but I took the bills anyway.

"Buy yourself some breakfast," he said, "and keep the change. We'll be getting in touch with you." He revved up his flatiron and took off toward the classy section of town.

I headed for my lawyer Sol's place down by the jail. Sol was in tight with every racket in town and I wanted to ask him if there was anything to the kid's story.

It wasn't a long ride. You know how the blocks are there, all about the same, rectangular mostly, neatly divided. Only there's no way to get across town without going all the way around the outside, unless of course you're going to jail.

I went upstairs to Sol's office, on the second floor of a little green place, like most of the green places on that side of town.

When I told him I had a client who wanted me to catch the mayor catting around with some floozie, Sol said that was very interesting because the mayor's wife knew all about it already but didn't mind as long as the mayor kept her supplied with mink. But Solly kept mum when I asked him if he knew what might really be going on.

That and all the other question marks beginning to pop up around the board made me suspicious enough to push it further.

The mail was in when I got back to my place. Beneath the stack of letters was a small orange card, you know the kind. "Take a ride on the Reading," it said. "If you pass GO collect $200." I didn't have to pass GO to get there.

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The Reading Station couldn't have been worth much more than 200 bucks on the open market.

The guy I had met in the flatiron earlier was sitting beside a pillar in the terminal, holding a paper up in front of him but not reading it.

I bought a copy of the daily and plunked down next to him. He told me around his toothpick to watch an office door on the far side of the terminal. I did. Pretty soon the D.A. himself came out of the door—with a luscious blonde draped over his arm. The guy next to me made a sucking noise with his toothpick meaning that was what I was supposed to notice.

"The girl with the D.A.," he said, "she's the one the mayor's cattin' with."

That explained why Solly was so quiet that morning. When the D.A. itched, Solly usually scratched.

I had seen the girl before, at Park Place parties. Her name was Flossie DeVoto. She looked like an angel but she could make men do crazy things for her.

"Look," I said, "I have a high regard for my health, son, and would just as soon not get involved in this caper."

The little guy cleared his throat and said, "Reach beneath your seat."

I reached, expecting to get a handful of bubble gum, and found another 1000 bucks of gold folding money.

"All this bread isn't going down for any missing husband case," I said. "Level with me."

The guy chuckled and said, "I heard you was shrewd, McG. All right, there's four big players in this game, and the mayor and the D.A. ain't even two of 'em. They're just fronts for two big boys who keep their money, so to speak, tucked beneath the board."

Something about this kid gave me the creeps. He wasn't telling all he knew and I didn't like being played footsies with by a client.

"Where do I come in?" I asked.

"My client is a fairly small operator trying to move up in the game. Most of his assets are in cash, and as you know, in this game cash ain't worth much compared to other things like real estate and utilities. You know what I mean?"

"In other words, if I spill the beans to the D.A. about the blonde and the mayor, your man might be able to make a little bad blood between them and clean up, is that it?"

"Divide and conquer," he said in his New Jersey accent.

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"It's dirty work," I said.

"Yeah, but the money's clean, straight from the bank." His wink was supposed to mean something to me, so I figured his man was the banker in the big game.

He told me to visit an address on Park Place that night. I folded my paper and left.

That evening I got in my shoe and hopped over to the Park Place address that the kid had given me. A sleek silver thimble was pulling up in front and Flossie DeVoto was behind the wheel in a gold lamé dress.

She slid out of the car like a floating angel. She was glowing like money and her dress was slit up the side and showed the kind of leg that men drool over.

Angel went into the big red hotel there and was buzzed in. She was expected. But about two minutes later I saw a light go on on the third floor and heard her scream. Somebody came charging out of the side of the hotel and ran off down the alley. It was a setup. The girl was being framed for something and I needed to know what.

I ran into the foyer and pressed about ten buttons with the palms of my hands. Somebody buzzed me in. I ran up to the room where I'd seen the light go on. I found Flossie DeVoto chewing on her fists, looking bugeyed at a body on the floor. I rolled him over. It was the mayor.

I grabbed Angel by the arm and headed for the fire escape. I knew that whoever had done the old geezer in had also called the cops. We got across the street and into my shoe just as the Black Maria pulled up. Four or five bulls ran into the hotel and Angel and I roared off in the shoe to my place and used the back door.

I pumped her full of bourbon to calm her down and found out that she had a habit of collecting civic officials the way some people collect seashells.

We had been set up by whoever knocked off the mayor and I had more than a hunch it was the kid and whoever he was working for. They had me cute, I'll say. They had it fixed so I'd be there when the cops came—with 2000 bucks in my pocket and the D.A.'s girl friend weeping on my arm.

I saw blood. I left Angel with the bottle of bourbon to keep her company and hit the streets. I had to find the little creep and fast. Somebody was sure to have seen my shoe in front of the hotel and maybe seen me get into it with the girl. Anyway, the police probably

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knew all about that now, thanks to my little friend. I busted out the light over my license plate and started cruising the board, beginning down on Baltic and moving my way around.

I passed GO once but decided not to stop for my $200. No sense in making myself too visible.

I finally saw the guy ducking into a hedge in Marvin Gardens. I nosed my shoe into the curb and flew out the door after him. I tackled him in the middle of a vacant lot.

I stood the little weasel on his pins and grabbed him by the neck. "Look," I said, "I don't like being used for a patsy by somebody who's trying to play both sides against the middle, see? You're going to come clean on this caper and give me the straight dope 'cause I'm as hot as a stolen cop car right now, thanks to you, and if I can't straighten this mess out I'll be in the can with no visitors for ten turns around the board."

The kid's eyes were bugging out and I loosed my grip on him a little to let him talk. "Somebody's trying to buy all the railroads," he wheezed.

"Not good enough," I said shaking him. "Somebody's always trying to buy all the railroads. That's the way it is in this game. You don't kill people for it."

I shook him again to let him know I was still listening. He was scared all right.

"All right, you win, McGinty," he whimpered. "Like I told you, there's four big operators somewhere. The mayor and the D.A. were fronting for two of them. The mayor's man has the utilities in his pocket and the D.A.'s man has the Reading and, I think, the Short Line too. The third guy has the Pennsylvania and the B&O, but wants all four. My man set up the mayor and figured that in the confusion he could grab the Water Works and the Electric Company. He figured that by tying in the D.A.'s girl he could get the railroads from the D.A. and then squeeze the third guy out of the game altogether."

"And you needed a patsy to hang it all on and there I was, right? Somebody to keep your boss clean?"

He nodded. "As near as I can figure that's the way it is. I'm not sure. You know how things are in this town sometimes. You're never sure what's going on."

He was holding back.

"Don't give me that business," I said. "Sure it's a crazy world, but there are some things you can depend on. You get two hundred

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bucks every time you pass GO and if you land on the wrong square you go to jail. There's an answer for everything, so tell me who's behind it all. Who's your man?"

"I don't know. I swear I don't know," he moaned.

I slapped him once quick across the face. "Who's behind it?" I shouted. "Who put you up to it?"

He yelped like a hurt dog. "I don't know, McGinty. I swear to God I don't. I get these orange cards beneath my door like everybody else and I gotta do what they say, that's all. You know how it is."

I told him I didn't know how it is and slapped him again.

"All right, all right," he whined. "I'll give you all I know. I've just talked to my man over the phone, never seen him at all, honest to God." He paused. A look of something like terror came into his eyes, like he was seeing a ghost or something. "But over the phone," he continued softly, "I can sometimes hear the sound of rattling dice in the background. It sounds far away. He must call from where they play the big game. And that's all I know, I swear."

I could tell by how limp he was that he was telling the truth.

I cuffed him to the door of my shoe and hailed Molloy, the fat cop on the corner, who took the little squirt to jail. I promised the kid I'd visit him the next time I was on the corner. That was all I could do, I knew that. The big guys never get caught.

I sat in my shoe and burned some tobacco. Silly thoughts ran through my head. Maybe somebody *was* up there playing dice with the world. Maybe the kid did hear something like that over the phone. How else could you explain the mayor's being out of the game just like that? And what about those orange cards we all get? I wondered if some day the whole world would fold up like a big game board, or if the back of a huge hand would some day wipe everything away, hotels, houses, everything.

I shook my head clear and laughed at myself. This was getting too deep for me. I turned on my shoe and hopped the ten or fifteen squares over to my place. Angel was there with the bottle of bourbon. That would help me forget about the game for a while.

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

BOUCHERCON: Time for the annual main event for mystery fans is drawing rapidly near. The tenth annual Anthony Boucher Memorial Mystery Convention will be held at the Sheraton-Universal Hotel in Los Angeles on the weekend of October 5–6–7. The Guest of Honor this year is the masterful author of *The Blessing Way, Dance Hall of the Dead, The Fly on the Wall,* and *Listening Woman*—Tony Hillerman, whose Navajo policeman, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn, is as real and as fascinating as any detective of this decade. Among the other confirmed participants for the fete are Robert Bloch, Bill Pronzini, Harlan Ellison, Gordon Gordon, William L. DeAndrea, and John Ball. There is also a possibility that W. R. Burnett (*Little Caesar, Scarface, High Sierra,* and *The Asphalt Jungle*) and Philip MacDonald (*Warrant for X, The Rasp, The List of Adrian Messenger*) will attend. There also will be the usual gallimaufry of films, books for sale. banquet and other daily deadly delights. The registration fee up to September 1 is $10.00; $12.00 thereafter, or a $6.00 one-day walk-in charge. Checks and inquiries should be sent to Bouchercon X, P. O. Box 6, 4356½ Woodman Ave., Sherman Oaks, CA 91423.

FOUL PLAY: It's such a delicious idea that you would assume someone else would have thought of it long ago. Although some authors have posed for their own books (Mickey Spillane —and, more than once, his wife —for example, and William E. Chambers on the cover of *Death Toll*), I can recall no publisher previously engaged in the mass murder of people associated with the world of mystery fiction. The Foul Play Press, a division of Countryman Press (Taftsville, VT 05073) has begun a program of reprinting Phoebe Atwood Taylor novels in trade paperbacks at $4.50 each. What is unusual about the series is that the first three cover corpses are Edward Gorey (artist of the macabre), who is foully stabbed on the

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front cover of *The Cut Direct*, Dilys Winn (perpetrator of *Murder Ink*), found bloodily on the cover of *Figure Away*, and Carol Brener (proprietress of Murder Ink, a mystery bookstore in New York), done in on the cover of *Octagon House*. Soon to follow are three more Taylor books—*Cold Steal, Six Iron Spiders*, and *Proof of the Pudding*—with two corpses already photographed: Joan Kahn (mystery editor at Harper & Row) and, well, me, with head bashed in by a large frying pan. They are good books and good fun, even if a bit pricey. Next on the schedule for Foul Play Press are reprints of Stanley Ellin's first five novels, which add grace to any publisher's list.

MURDER BY MAIL: Which author has had the greatest number of books published by a book club? Can you name the only book which is an original publication of one of the mystery book clubs (not counting omnibuses of previously published novels)? The answers can be unearthed in Michael L. Cook's most useful history and bibliography of the three major mystery clubs: The Detective Book Club, the now-defunct Unicorn Book Club, and The Mystery Guild. Listing every book published by these clubs in chronological order, with an author index for cross reference, *Murder By Mail* (Cook Publications, 3318 Wimberg Ave., Evansville, IN 47712, $6.00 paperbound) is an invaluable aid to those attempting to form complete collections of the books published by one or more of those clubs. The same publisher issues *The Unicorn*, an advertising journal devoted to fantasy and mystery fiction. The cost of a subscription is $6.00 for six issues ($12.00 for first class) in the U.S. The answers to the above questions, incidentally, are Erle Stanley Gardner and *The Famous McGarry Stories* by Matt Taylor, published in 1958 (May, to be precise) by The Detective Book Club.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

"No one has *ever* escaped from Alcatraz," the Warden (Patrick McGoohan), barely stifling an obviously corrosive viciousness, informs the new inmate—who has already made a habit of prison escapes elsewhere. But this is Alcatraz, America's Bastille, a Devil's Island in the churning waters of San Francisco Bay, since 1934 our only non-rehabilitative, maximum security, minimum privilege, "escape-proof" federal penitentiary,

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where the standing orders were that firepower would not be withheld even if convicts should seize guards as hostages. The new inmate is Frank Morris, who in 1962 masterminded a break with two others which—by exposing the prison's vulnerability—set in motion the forces which closed Alcatraz a year later. Clint Eastwood plays Morris (who has never been seen since he got away) in a low-key, non-violent, very faithful recreation of that bust-out, *Escape from Alcatraz,* a film in which for most of its running time we watch three men quietly, methodically scratch their way through moisture-weakened gray walls, crawl up air shafts, and finally—with rafts made of rubber raincoats—slip into the dark waters of the bay.

What makes this claustrophobic exercise fascinating is the realism of its setting: it was actually shot within the walls of Alcatraz, restored by Eastwood's film company to its former bleak glory. (Only two other movies used the prison—in parts of *Point Blank* and *The Enforcer.)* Director Don Siegel, who early in his career was responsible for the pandemonic *Riot in Cellblock 11,* along with *Caged* the ultimate prison statement in films, here refrains from riots or shootouts with no lessening of suspense. Even the characters — rather sketchily drawn convict nobility and nasties — do not get very much in the way of the basic, overwhelming problem: getting over (or, in this case, *through)* the walls of the nation's total-security, total-punishment prison, nicknamed with awesome and barbaric accuracy "The Rock."

Bloody visions abound in *Terrorist Chic* (Hawthorn), an exploration by political scientist Michael Selzer into the mass culture of the Seventies and its fascination with violence. In the display windows of the most fashionable stores, impeccably dressed mannequins act out bizarre scenes of hangings and murders; punk-rock entertainers such as the Dead Boys and the Werewolves are the current rage; today's movies act out the most casual brutality; military fantasy, bondage, and vampirism are the "in" themes of fashions and discos. Selzer recites these terrors of today with somewhat panting enthusiasm, but makes intelligent investigative interviews and comments, suggesting how this movement crystallizes the dilemmas of modern times. One may not fully agree, but at any rate it's a mind-popping visit down into the zombie zone.

Violence is also a part of Walter Gibson's *The Shadow Scrapbook* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), but it's the more acceptable violence of that Old Testament-style avenger and ruthless slayer of evil catalogued in all his Depression fervor: the pulp magazines, comic books, lengthy radio series, movies and serials. Gibson, now a hearty young fellow in his eighties enjoying almost total recall, explains how the flitting figure of darkness in

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his novel *The Living Shadow* (done for a Street & Smith magazine) evolved into the masked hero we remember today, how he actually learned the invisibility secret which clouded men's minds (created only for radio, a medium where invisibility was easier; the earlier pulp figure just darted in the shadows of the outer blackness), and how Lamont Cranston was at the beginning one of *many* identities he assumed. One can browse through comics, codes, full radio scripts (one starring Orson Welles), but the most spectacular treat of the book is its reproductions of many of the pulps' full-color covers, assembled by Anthony Tollin: the Shadow lurking, or swinging over a New York street, or allegorically playing chess with a fanged fiend ("The Crime Master") over the city itself. The Shadow now, alas, has vanished for good, and this superbly visual scrapbook makes us ache for a time when at least one hero knew and protected us from the evils lurking in the hearts of men.

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INTERVIEW: THOMAS CHASTAIN

Thomas Chastain writes police novels about New York and its people. Few writers of any kind have ever brought the city to life so vividly, so realistically, and so memorably. *Vital Statistics* (Charter, $1.95) is still a successful paperback edition and his new book, *High Voltage* (Doubleday, $8.95), continues the exploits of J. T. Spanner, private detective, and Max Kauffman, police official.

EQMM: After your years as a journalist, what made you decide to write crime fiction?

CHASTAIN: I discovered a very interesting thing: all my life I had enjoyed the mystery and suspense novel—as a reader. I never intended to write in that field.

The first novel I wrote was very serious; it was called *Judgment Day,* and absolutely nothing happened with it. By sheer accident, I had a plot for a thriller, which became *Pandora's Box.* Once I had done it, I discovered that I loved it. I also realized that I had accumulated a lot of knowledge about mystery fiction by having read so much of it. So, without having to think about it, I could put to use all those things I'd always thought so much about because I had always taken the mystery novel very seriously. By the time *Pandora's Box* was finished, I knew that this was what I had always wanted to do but hadn't known it. I had also discovered that I had started something I couldn't let go of, which was, first, a couple of characters and, second, that I'd become interested in writing about the city. This was what I wanted to do

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from then on.

EQMM: Did you get your knowledge of New York City primarily as a reporter or merely by living in it?

CHASTAIN: I never started out to consciously research the city, but when I wrote *Pandora's Box* I discovered that I could feed little things into it, little things that I had observed over the years. After that, I began to look more carefully for material for subsequent books.

EQMM: And you knew there would be subsequent books?

CHASTAIN: I had a plan (or maybe a dream) at the end of *Pandora's Box,* which was to write a series of books with two characters plus the city of New York—to consciously make the city a character in the book. One of the characters is Max Kauffman, who is Deputy Chief Inspector, and who lives very well, giving me a chance to look at and report that stratum. The other is J. T. Spanner, the private eye, who deals with the rougher element of the city. But the city always had to be present as an element. It seemed to me that I could take these three elements and create my own world, my fantasy world, of New York City. And that's what the books are all about.

EQMM: Have you been consciously influenced by other writers?

CHASTAIN: Every writer is. I have a theory that writing cannot be taught but that it can be learned. And I think the way you learn to write is by reading other writers. In the mystery field, if there had been no Hammett and no Chandler, I could never have written.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Political thrillers are very plentiful at the moment. Fortunately, not all of them are retellings of Watergate. Charles McCarry, who previously has written espionage novels about the recent past, turns to the presidential election of 1996 in his latest book and produces the best political novel I have read in some time.

**** Charles McCarry: *The Better Angels,* Dutton, $9.95. The plot of McCarry's novel and the ethical issues raised are not so different from what other writers in this field are doing. What sets this book apart are the cast of characters, smaller but more deeply probed and closely observed than in most large-canvas political novels, and the beautiful, quotable prose style.

*** Barry Schiff and Hal Fishman: *The Vatican Target,* St. Martin's, $8.95. Fans of *Airport* and *The High and the Mighty* will find this account of a hijacked 747 (one of whose pas-

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sengers is the Pope) a splendid airborne action thriller. The flying parts are so expertly done they make up for an incredible earthbound romance between a terrorist and a hostage and the authors' too obvious pre-casting of the movie version. (There's a *terrific* part for John Houseman, and Schiff and Fishman want to be sure you know it.)

*** Alan Scholefield: *Point of Honour,* Morrow, $8.95. An author who agrees to write a book about his father, celebrated as a hero of Dunkirk, encounters a complex 40-year-old mystery. Though an unlikely story and not quite the fine book it starts out to be, the novel is well written and gripping throughout.

*** Leigh James: *The Caliph Intrigue,* Dodd, Mead, $7.95. This Washington thriller involves a courageous Senator, the timely world oil question, and a new religious (and potentially political) leader of the world's Islamic peoples. Though undistinguished in style and dialogue, the story moves very well, and the neat plot dovetails in a satisfactory conclusion.

*** John Reese: *Legacy of a Land Hog,* Doubleday, $7.95. Reese is a writer who sometimes combines detection with western elements, but the whodunit this book's dust jacket promises doesn't really materialize. It's still a good western, however, and the nonagenarian patriarch of the Dot M Dot ranch, whose changeable will is a matter of concern to many, is a fine character.

** Elizabeth Walter: *In the Mist,* Arkham House, $8.95. The English ghost stories in this collection are pleasant and readable if seldom precisely chilling. I agree with the author that the last story, "Davy Jones's Tale," is much the best.

** John Wyllie: *The Killer Breath,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $7.95. Like earlier Dr. Quarshie mysteries, this one offers a vivid and interesting West African background, well drawn characters, serviceable if vaguely stilted prose, and a not-too-engrossing plot line. Its best feature is a unique and delightful variation on the last-reel cavalry rescue of western movies.

** Elizabeth Hanley: *Guilty As Charged,* Belmont-Tower, $1.75. As a gentle, low-key, nostalgic account of Illinois small-town life in the Depression, this autobiographical novel has much to offer. The narrator, Betty, a sickly and spirited child of nine, and her mother, repository of everybody's problems, are very well executed characterizations. As an account of a local murder case and its outcome, the book is less successful, rather limply concluding as a deeply felt but unoriginal tract against capital punishment.

** Laura Colburn: *Death in a Small World,* Zebra (Mystery Puzzler #23), $1.95. Unlike some entries in the publisher's illustrated sealed-ending mystery series, this one really is a well clued fair-play detective novel. Involv-

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ing murder among struggling New York artists and featuring the requisite female sleuth, this debut reads well and promises better things to come from the author. Unfortunately, the murderer's identity (if not the clues that point to it) is painfully obvious.

Finally, here's one to avoid: James Patterson's *The Jericho Commandment* (Crown, $10.00) is an exploitative shocker culminating in a bloodbath at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Made up of short chapters and one-sentence paragraphs, full of screen references, it is as movie-ish as they come. It is obvious that the author did not set out to trivialize the Holocaust, but that is the unfortunate effect of using it as a jumping-off point for a book as shallowly conceived as this one.

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNT PRICE
Bagley, Desmond	FLYAWAY	Doubleday	$9.95	$7.95
Clark, Gail	THE BARONESS OF BOW STREET	Putnam	9.95	7.95
Egan, Lesley	THE HUNTERS AND THE HUNTED	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Gash, Jonathan	GOLD BY GEMINI	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
James, Leigh	THE CALIPH INTRIGUE	Dodd, Mead	7.95	6.35
McCarry, Charles	THE BETTER ANGELS	Dutton	9.95	7.95
McInerny, Ralph	LYING THREE	Vanguard	8.95	6.95
O'Donnell, Lillian	FALLING STAR	Putnam	9.95	7.95
Patterson, James	THE JERICHO COMMANDMENT	Crown	10.00	8.00
Perrin, Robert	JEWELS	Stein and Day	9.95	7.95
Perry, Ritchie	BISHOP'S PAWN	Pantheon	8.95	6.95
Reese, John	LEGACY OF A LAND HOG	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Rendell, Ruth	MAKE DEATH LOVE ME	Doubleday	8.95	6.95
Schiff, Barry and Hal Fishman	THE VATICAN TARGET	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Scholefield, Alan	POINT OF HONOUR	Morrow	8.95	6.95
Scott, Jack S.	A CLUTCH OF VIPERS	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Stein, Aaron Marc	ONE DIP DEAD	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Swarthout, Glendon	SKELETONS	Doubleday	9.95	7.95
Underwood, Michael	SMOOTH JUSTICE	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Wainwright, John	BRAINWASH	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Walker, Mark	CASSIS	Walker	8.95	6.95
Wyllie, John	THE KILLER BREATH	Doubleday	7.95	6.35

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A horrifying story, told with Celia Fremlin's "special touch"—one that will touch us all . . .

A LOVELY MORNING TO DIE

by CELIA FREMLIN

If only she'd known it would be as easy as this, she'd have done it long ago. Still holding the pillow firmly over the old woman's face, Millicent allowed her eyes to travel warily down the length of the wide old-fashioned bed. Beneath the blankets and the worn limp eiderdown the emaciated body raised scarcely a hump; a long thin irregularity was all it was, not as high as even the shallowest of the graves in the nearby churchyard.

She had been afraid there would be some sort of struggle, that at the approach of death the feeble, almost useless old limbs would be infused with demonic strength, that the old worn-out body would thresh about like a great fish beneath the blankets, refusing to die. Most of all, she had feared there might be gasps and chokings and moans of protest from under the pillow. If this had happened, would she have been able to go on with it? Or would her nerve have cracked, forcing her to abandon the resolution that had cost her so many heart-searchings, so many self-questionings, over so many weeks?

If only she'd known it was going to be like this—the victim so peaceful, so cooperative almost, the bedroom so quiet! Had she only known this was how it would be, she'd have done it months—no, years—ago.

But how long did she have to stay like this, clutching and pressing down on the pillow? How long *do* you have to hold a pillow over a person's face before you can be sure—quite, quite sure—that the last breath is gone? For the first time she comprehended the awful loneliness of the task she had undertaken, with no precedents to go by, no one in all the world to give advice or guidance.

She bent low, pressing her ear against the pillow, as though trying to catch some whispered last words, some final message from her once-beloved mother.

It was breathing she was listening for, of course; and there was none. No sound; no stir of movement; and yet still she dared not

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release the pressure, not just yet. Edging the weight of her body farther over the pillow, to make sure that it stayed in place, she slid her hand beneath the blankets and felt for the old woman's heart. The ribs stuck out like the slats of a plate rack, the pouches of wrinkled skin lay still and flaccid beneath her touch.

No heartbeat. No flutter of breath. Nothing. It was over! So quietly, so decently! It was beyond belief!

And then, suddenly, like a great yellow sea monster rising from the deep, her mother's face lurched upward, grimacing, contorted, and a howl like a wolf's burst from the parched lips as with hands like claws the creature wrenched the pillow from her daughter's grasp, and flung it to the ground—

Millicent woke, sweating with terror, to find herself safe in bed, in her own neat, austere little bedroom just across the landing from her mother's; and for a moment she lay still, breathing deeply, recovering from the nightmare: reorientating herself, reassuring herself that she *was* awake, and that none of those awful things had actually happened.

Yes, it was all right. It had only been a dream—one of those unnerving nightmares that had been troubling her increasingly of late.

She really ought to consult Dr. Ferguson about these bad nights she was having, get him to prescribe something. He was a kind man, and, so far as his busy schedule permitted, concerned for Millicent's plight. Always, after his routine visit to her mother every Wednesday, he would make a point of asking Millicent how she felt. Eating all right, was she? Not overdoing it? She must remember that she wasn't getting any younger—62, wasn't it, this year?

More than once he had insisted on taking her blood pressure, had tut-tutted, with slightly raised eyebrows, at the result, and had urged her to take things easy for a while, to try not to do too much. He had known as well as she had that with a senile, bedridden old mother of 92 in her sole charge, there was no way Millicent could take things easy, no way she could not do too much but since there was nothing that either of them could do about it, they had smiled appropriate politenesses at one another, and he had gone on his way. At least it was nice to know that he cared.

It was useless to hope for any more sleep that night. Already the light was beginning to show round the edges of the curtains, and outside the twittering of the first birds had begun. Through the open door across the landing (both doors were kept wide-open at

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night now, lest Mother's low moans of distress should fail to rouse her) Millicent could see the outlines of Mother's vast mahogany wardrobe, glimmering grayly in the half light of early dawn; and beyond it, deep in the shadowed heart of the sickroom, she could hear the harsh, rasping snores that for so long had been the backdrop of all her days and nights.

Only occasionally, now, did the old woman rouse herself from this ugly, uneasy sleep; to moan, or babble, or sometimes to plead wordlessly, unavailingly, staring desperately into her daughter's eyes, begging urgently for Millicent knew not what. A bedpan? A loving kiss on her cracked lips? Or merely a nice cup of tea, to be fed, tepid and sickly sweet, through the spout of a feeding cup, trickles of it dribbling down the wrinkled, flabby jowls onto the pillow, whose cases Millicent often had to change four or five times a day.

There was no knowing what Mother wanted: and often Millicent, who had once loved her mother so much, had drawn from her such strength and love and comfort through the long years of family crises, family rejoicings—often, Millicent would eagerly proffer all three—the bedpan, the kiss, and the cool tea—almost simultaneously; and when, afterward, the old woman sank once more into noisy, unrefreshing sleep, it was hard to tell which, if any of them, had done the trick.

Perhaps none of them had. Perhaps the invalid had fallen asleep from sheer weariness, exhausted by the futile effort of asking . . . asking . . . asking for the one relief her daughter would not, could not give.

Or could she? More and more often lately, through the long wearying days of nursing, and housework, and more nursing, and through the even longer anxious, insomniac nights, forever on the alert, forever half listening through the two wide-open doors for sounds of distress—more and more, during these past weeks, Millicent had found herself turning over and over in her mind the ethics of her impending decision.

There was no doubt at all about what her mother would have wanted—her *real* mother, that is, the loving, energetic, courageous woman who even at 80 had tended her home single-handed, and her half acre of garden; had invited grandchildren and great-grandchildren on long visits, and had even found time to do volunteer work at the local hospital as well; about the views of this vigorous, life-loving person there could be no question at all:

"You won't let me get like that ever, will you, darling?" she'd said

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more than once to her daughter after a particularly harrowing session at the geriatric ward. "It's wicked, it's obscene, to let a person linger on like that—just a hulk of flesh, all meaning, all dignity gone! It's a wicked thing, it's the one and only fear I have about getting old—that I might end up like that! You won't let it happen to me, will you, darling? You'll make sure, won't you, if I'm past doing for myself, that they bump me off good and early?"

Such an easy promise to make, with the August sun streaming in through the kitchen window, and the putative victim up to her elbows in flour, preparing a batch of jam tarts for the impending visit of her two great-grandsons, aged nine and eleven, and with appetites like wolves.

"Of course I promise," she'd answered, and meant it; for in fact she agreed entirely with her mother's attitude, admired and respected her for it. Besides, it all seemed so incredibly unlikely. Mother was the kind of person who would die in harness when the time came—drop dead wheeling the library cart along some polished corridor, or while sawing too vigorously at a dead branch overhanging her beloved garden.

But it hadn't happened like that; and how could you be sure, now, that this mumbling, senile old wreck was still of the same mind?

Once, several years ago, while Mother had still been her sane and sharp-witted self, Millicent had posed this very question to her; and her reply had been immediate and unhesitating:

"You must do what *I've* asked you to do, darling—*I, myself*—the real *me*. This person talking to you now—the one you see in front of you, *she's* the *real* me, the one you must listen to. Pay no attention to the views—if any—of the mindless, dribbling old loony I may one day turn into, because she won't be *me* any more, not in any real sense. Do you think I'd allow *that* senile old hag to decide how *I* am going to die?"

Proud words, and unanswerable. Quietly Millicent had resolved that, should the occasion ever arise, she would do exactly as her mother had asked. For so brave, so indomitable a person, how could a loving daughter do less?

"Aah . . . aah. . . !"

The snoring had ceased, and at the familiar, urgent summons, Millicent scrambled hurriedly out of bed, her night's rest at an end, and hastened to her mother's bedside.

Too late; but of course the poor old creature couldn't help it. Wrinkling her nose as she edged the soiled sheet, inch by inch, from

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under the inert, unhelpful length of flesh, it came to her, with sudden, piercing intensity, that if only she had the courage of her convictions, she would never have to do this again.

Never. Ever. By tonight she could be free. Free to go to bed, and sleep and sleep and sleep the whole night through, for the first time in years. And her mother, her beloved mother, could be lying clean and dignified at last, in a nice clean coffin, all the humiliations at an end.

Clean. Clean. That, somehow, seemed the most important thing of all for someone like Mother, so proud, so capable, bustling around her shining, well kept home, full of flowers, and with windows thrown wide to the sweet morning air.

And later Millicent said to herself, I will do it. I will do as she asked. I promised her I would, and I will.

But not today. Not with my nerves all to pieces from that awful dream. Not with my hands trembling like this and my throat closing up with fear at the very idea—

No, not today. Tomorrow.

But that night she had the same dream all over again. Well, not exactly the same, though it started off in just the same way—with the pillow held quietly but firmly over the sleeping face, and the thin acquiescent figure lying so still and unprotesting beneath the bedclothes; and there was, too, that same sense of vague surprise, of uneasy relief, that it was all so simple.

But after that the dream changed. This time there was no yellow, accusing face lunging upward. Instead, just as Millicent was beginning to feel sure that the thing was finished, that breath and heartbeat were at an end—at just this moment there came suddenly from beneath the bedclothes an ominous gurgling sound, louder and louder.

So, even after death, this was going to go on—and on and on and on—to all eternity? To Millicent's dreaming brain there seemed no absurdity in the idea, and she stared, numb with horror, at the silent, murdered figure . . .

Again Millicent woke in a sweat of terror; again she had to lie for a few minutes, recovering, getting her breath back, reassuring herself that it had only been a dream.

And even after this, and even though the familiar, rasping snores could be clearly heard from across the landing, she still did not feel wholly at ease. The dream itself was nonsense, obviously, but what

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more likely than that some sound, some disturbance from the next room had triggered it off? The most probable thing was that the old woman, failing to rouse her daughter with her feeble moans, had had another accident; and that Millicent, subliminally aware of this, and subliminally guilty about sleeping on when she should have wakened, had converted the whole thing into a hideous dream.

Yes, that's what must have happened. And so, tired though she was, her eyes drooping with sleep, there seemed no alternative but to tiptoe across the landing and investigate.

It was all right. There was no accident—only the unchanging, all-pervading odor of sickness and old age, and this would go only when the old woman, too, was gone. Strange that it is death alone that has the power, like a mighty sea wind, to sweep away the smell of death.

The old woman was deeply snoring, and did not stir as Millicent leaned over her. The sunken yellow face looked as peaceful as it would ever look this side of the grave, but even so it was not entirely at rest. Every so often, while Millicent watched, it would twitch a little, as if at some small irritation—the gnats and midges, perhaps, of some long-past summer evening in a more leisured world than this: friends gathered for after-dinner conversation on the terrace: the tinkle of coffee spoons, the easy rise and fall of long-dead talk and laughter, far into the summer night . . .

I ought to do it now—*now*—so that these tranquil thoughts will be the last she will ever have; so that a sort of dim peace, at least, and the absence of discomfort, may be her last experiences on this earth.

Slowly, carefully, and making every effort not to rouse the sleeping figure, Millicent reached for the spare pillow and laid it softly across the dreaming face. Then, leaning forward with all her weight, she pressed down . . . down . . .

Not even the most frightful of the recent nightmares, not even the most exaggerated of all her fevered imaginings, had prepared Millicent for anything like *this*. Instantly, and as if galvanized into hideous life by some sort of monstrous shock treatment out of science fiction, the body leaped and plunged beneath her, with a strength that was beyond belief.

The old withered arms, like sticks, flailed and fought their way out from under the blankets and battered at the empty air. The knees, immobile for years, jackknifed beneath the bedclothes, pitching blankets and eiderdown to left and right; the legs, weak as

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string, kicked out in all directions, pounding against the mattress. The whole moribund body, which had scarcely stirred in years, lashed this way and that beneath the covers, arching, heaving—even with all her strength, all the weight of her body, Millicent could barely hold the creature down.

Promises, promises! How could either of them, making their humane and civilized pact all those years ago, have guessed that *this* was what they were undertaking? That Life, even at its last gasp, even with all its faculties rotted beyond repair and all its muscles wasted away to nothing, is like a tiger, mad with purpose, glittering with awful power; with teeth bared, claws outstretched, hurling into the face of the universe its surging, unquenchable determination to go on and on and on.

Half sobbing with the effort to hold the creature down, Millicent cried aloud, "I can't . . . I can't!"—or rather, fancied she was crying it aloud; but somehow no sound came. It was in her head that the words were pounding, "I can't . . . I can't!" and the sobbing was deep in her heart, and it only felt as if her cheeks were wet with tears . . .

This time when she woke, it was bright morning, and she started up in dismay, knowing at once, from the bright bands of sunlight across the carpet, that it was late, very late. And on a Wednesday, too, just when there was such a lot to do, with the doctor coming, and everything! How dreadfully unfortunate—though of course it was obvious how it had happened. Lying in bed recovering from that first nightmare, she must have dropped off again and gone straight into a second nightmare, almost like a continuation of the first.

Two nightmares in a single night! It was getting past a joking matter. Something would really have to be done.

And that afternoon, when Dr. Ferguson paid his routine visit to Mother, Millicent braced herself to tell him about the bad nights she'd been having lately, and how she'd been suffering from nightmares. At once he was full of sympathy, as she'd known he would be. He readily prescribed sleeping tablets for the next few nights, quite strong ones, guaranteed to eliminate dreaming of any kind.

"You've been overdoing it, my dear," he said, as he'd said so often. "Are you sure you wouldn't like me to get onto the Social Services and arrange for—"

But Millicent was adamant.

"I'll be fine," she assured him. "All I need is to catch up on my sleep, and then I'll be as right as rain."

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He did not press the matter. He knew how proud they could be, these single women of Millicent's generation, how self-sufficient, how determined never to show any weakness. You couldn't help admiring it, in a way; and perhaps it was a fortunate thing that such people did still exist, what with nursing help being in such short supply, and most of his other patients, untroubled by pride, clamoring and badgering for every kind of help that was available.

And of course he couldn't guess—or if he did guess—he was certainly going to keep his own counsel about it—that Millicent's main reason for not wanting a nurse or a home-help around was that once such a professional was installed, it would at once become enormously more difficult to carry out her plan.

For carry it out she would, despite the nightmares, despite all the doubts and terrors in her heart. A promise was a promise. Mother had trusted her, and she would not, must not, betray that trust.

That night she took one of the new sleeping pills, and it was marvelous. She felt herself sinking, within minutes, into a deep dreamless sleep such as she hadn't enjoyed in years. And when morning came, she couldn't remember when she'd felt so refreshed, so strong, so rested; so *right*, somehow, and ready for anything. And at once it came to her, with quiet, overwhelming certainty, and even with a strange sense of exhilaration, that *now* was the time.

Now, in the first bright freshness of the morning, with the early sunshine glinting through the trees, and herself feeling so well, so vigorous. And there had been no nightmares, either, this was the biggest blessing. For months now it had been the nightmares that had stood between the decision and the execution.

The sun was brightening every moment, and the soft air was filled with birdsong. A lovely morning to die. And to die in one's sleep, too, without—in all probability—a single pang.

It must be nearly seven now, but the snores from across the landing were still deep and regular. With any luck the poor creature would know nothing, her dark, comatose world growing merely a little darker, a little more bewildering, before it blacked out forever. Her last sensation—if indeed there would be any sensation—would surely be a sensation of peace, like sweet rain pattering down on her parched soul, and filling to the brim the dried-up hollows and spaces of her ruined mind.

Yes, that's how it would be. A small quiver, perhaps, as the snores rasped to an unaccustomed halt, and then the laboring lungs would be at rest, the flaccid, long-useless muscles would sink, almost im-

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perceptibly, into a deeper stillness.

That was all. Those fevered nightmares, which had transformed a helpless, harmless old woman on her deathbed into a monstrous effigy of malignancy and power—these had been nothing but the sick fantasies of Millicent's own mind—a mind strained almost beyond endurance, and racked by anxiety, guilt, and indecision. Nothing to do with the reality at all. The reality was merely sad, and almost ordinary—just one more ancient, helpless body which had outlived its mind—outlived its owner, in a manner of speaking. A body already dead, to all intents and purposes, and laid out ready for the small final formality of "Clinical Death," entitling it, at last, to a funeral and a proper death certificate.

Nothing alarming, then, in what Millicent was about to do. Nothing even very important. Just a small formality.

Tiptoeing round the wide bed, as she had done so often in her dreams, Millicent paused for a moment, clutching the fat feather pillow to her breast, and holding her breath, fearful lest the old woman was about to wake. The snoring, though still loud, seemed not quite so regular as it had been a minute earlier; and when she ventured to creep nearer, Millicent observed that the invalid's crumpled yellow face was no longer wholly at rest. A small grimace twisted her mouth, as though at some twinge of pain pushing up through the dim medley of her dreams; and the eyelids, too, were twitching uneasily, as though the old eyes beneath, restless from too much darkness, were fumbling inexpertly for the light.

This was *Mother*! It was incredible, it was beyond the power of the human imagination to encompass, but this creature really, actually, was her! *Mother*, who had once laughed and chatted and run a home and bounced children on her knee and cooked meals for everybody. Somewhere, hidden deep, deep behind that withered mask, in a darkness and a silence that no voice could any longer penetrate, she was still there.

It was *Mother* whom Millicent was about to kill—and how could she be sure, absolutely sure, that this was still what Mother wanted? Locked away in there, beyond the range of communication—how could one *know*?

And instantly, it seemed to Millicent, the answer came, loudly and clearly across the years, in Mother's own dear, familiar voice: "Do what *I* ask you, darling! Don't allow that old hag to decide how *I* am going to die!"

"She won't, Mum! She won't!" Millicent whispered, low and ur-

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gent, "I won't let her!"—and with tears pouring down her cheeks, and her heart overflowing with tenderness and love, she laid the pillow gently over the twitching, wizened face, and pressed down . . . down . . . down . . . Leaning close, as though gathering her mother up in a final, loving embrace . . .

Perfect love casteth out fear. Why, then, this chill of terror creeping through every limb? Why this sense of awful foreboding, this pounding of the heart, louder, louder, like the very tramp of doom?

When she woke this time, it was to the sound of voices; low voices, not much above whispers:

"A stroke . . . Yes. Yes, completely, I'm afraid—right down both sides." And then another voice, strangely familiar this time, though for some reason Millicent could not put a name to it.

"I've been afraid that something like this would happen. High blood pressure. All that heavy nursing, and adamant about refusing any outside help—always so proud. Yes, rather odd, that; she must have collapsed while making the bed, because they found her on the floor in a great tangle of bedclothes, and the pillows all everywhere, and the poor old woman shivering and groaning on not much more than the mattress. Quite a problem she'll be, now that there'll be no one at home to look after her. They've brought her here for the time being, but—"

Here? Where was "here"? And who *were* all these people, anyway? What was going on? Millicent tried to open her eyes, but somehow it was too difficult. What had happened? Where was she? Was she still asleep, perhaps, still dreaming?

"Where am I?" she tried to say, and now she was sure she was still dreaming, for her voice made no sound, as is the way of dreams; and when she tried to sit up she found that her limbs, too, were paralyzed as so often happens in a nightmare.

As anyone who has ever suffered from nightmares well knows, it is no use struggling to wake up. All you can do is lie there quietly and wait, in the certain knowledge that you are bound to wake up in the end.

And so it was that Millicent lay there quietly and waited. And waited . . .

"Q"

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a *NEW* Selena Mead novelet by

PATRICIA McGERR

Selena Mead (now Mrs. Hugh Pierce), government agent extraordinary, whose husband headed the secret security branch known as Section Q, was in Jerusalem as a journalist, covering a story for her magazine. Her intelligence adventures of the past tended to make her "see spies and shadows everywhere" and to have an intuitive "sense of foreboding." Then, in the shadow of Masada, her intuition turned into fact, and the terror began . . .

CHAIN OF TERROR

by PATRICIA McGERR

Selena encountered Senator Stein in the lobby of the King David hotel on what was to have been her last evening in Israel. She had stopped at the desk to ask for messages when a familiar voice called her name. Turning, she took a step forward to meet the tall white-haired man who was hurrying toward her with arms outstretched.

"Selena, my dear, what a happy surprise!" He clasped both her hands and gave her a hearty kiss on the cheek. "I had no idea you were in Jerusalem. Is your husband with you?"

"No, this is a business trip," she explained, "and made on very short notice. My magazine set up interviews with the prime minister and several cabinet ministers. Then the Middle East correspondent was hit by appendicitis. I was sent over in his place."

"A wise choice," he approved. "There's nothing for you to cover in Washington after Congress adjourns."

"Only the White House and the Supreme Court," she replied with a smile. "How about you? Is your trip business or pleasure?"

"Entirely pleasure. And paid for, every penny, out of my own pocket." He shook an admonitory finger. "So don't you put me in

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one of those exposés about Congressional junkets at taxpayers' expense. Rachel and I are on holiday and I don't even intend to touch base with our Embassy. And speaking of Rachel, she'll be as delighted as I am to see you. How much longer will you be here?"

"I fly home tomorrow. At least———" She turned round to pick up the message slips the clerk had placed on the counter and glanced at the one on top. "Oh, no!"

"Not bad news, I hope."

"Disappointing. I expected confirmation of my plane reservation. Instead they say there's nothing available until the next day."

"Then you can come with us tomorrow," the senator said. "I've rented a car and we plan to drive down into the Negev. We'll visit Masada and the Qumran caves, maybe swim in the Dead Sea. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful," she responded. "I'm almost glad there's no space on the plane."

They got an early start the next morning. Selena and Rachel Stein, in the back seat, exchanged news of mutual friends at home while the senator maneuvered the car through the traffic-clogged streets. There was a faint chill in the November air, but the sun was bright in an almost cloudless sky. They circled the walls of the old city and crossed the Kidron valley to reach the Jericho road.

In less than an hour signs of modern civilization were left behind as they drove into the Judean wilderness along the shore of the Dead Sea. From a capacious handbag Mrs. Stein brought out a map and a guidebook. Selena joined her in tracing their route and picking out points of historical or current interest along the way. Most of the land was hilly and rock-strewn, sparse in trees or other vegetation, but occasionally they passed an Israeli settlement where irrigation and hard work had made the desert bloom with fields of eggplant or tomatoes and orchards of date palm. The senator slowed the car while his wife pointed out the caves of Qumran where the Dead Sea scrolls had been discovered.

"We'll stop on the way back," he promised.

Ahead of them in the distance rose the mountains of Moab where, according to tradition, Moses was buried. Behind them rusting tanks recalled the 1967 war. Near the oasis of Ein Gedi, where David hid from Saul, they crossed the border from the West Bank of Jordan and were waved through a checkpoint by Israeli soldiers. Farther on the senator slowed again to call their attention to three tents of

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black goatskin which marked a Bedouin camp. Nearby, women and children on camels tended a small flock of sheep.

"Where are the men?" Mrs. Stein asked.

"In their tents, of course," her husband replied. "Drinking coffee and solving the problems of the universe."

"Sounds like a Senate Committee," she remarked.

It was then that Selena first noticed the dust-covered Fiat behind them. Since leaving Jerusalem they had passed a number of buses but few private vehicles. Now, with their car slowed to a sightseers' crawl, Selena expected the other car to pull out and pass. Instead it dropped back, widening the gap between them. When the senator accelerated, the Fiat also increased speed.

Are we being followed, she wondered, and immediately derided herself for an over-active imagination. That's what comes of working with an intelligence organization. I see spies and shadows everywhere. But I'm not on a Section Q assignment now and there's no cause for suspicion. The people in that car are no doubt tourists too and have the same reason we have to slow down at interesting places. A few minutes later they turned off the main highway to a narrower road that led to Herod's ancient fortress of Masada.

"Impressive, isn't it?" the senator said as he stopped in the parking lot near the great flat-topped mountain. "Remind me to fill up with gas when we finish here. The gauge shows nearly empty."

They left the automobile and walked past souvenir shops to the cable-car station. Soon, with a group of other visitors, they boarded a bright red car and were swiftly transported upward to a point near the summit. Looking down from the swaying car they could see a few energetic travelers starting the climb by way of the Snake Path.

Selena's eyes were drawn to the parking lot where a small car had pulled up beside the senator's. The Fiat again? And if so, what did it signify? Only that, like ourselves, they've come to view Masada. Shaking off a sense of foreboding, she turned back to Rachel who, guidebook in hand, was pointing out the restored walls of a Roman camp.

From the place where they left the cable car it was a short but steep walk up rocky steps to the summit. Sighting benches at the top, Mrs. Stein gave an exaggerated sigh of relief.

"Ah, good! We can sit down for a few minutes. That climb really wore me out."

But it was the senator who was breathing hard, his face flushed,

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and Selena suspected that his wife's pretense of exhaustion was meant to give him a chance to rest without an admission of weakness.

When they were seated the older woman drew from her bag another small book and read from it the story of Masada. The words took them back 19 centuries to the final revolt against Rome when Jewish zealots had captured this stronghold and held it for three years after the fall of Jerusalem. Surrounded at last by 10,000 Roman legionaries, the defenders—960 men, women, and children—chose to die by their own hands.

"I learned the speech of their leader Eleazar as a boy," the senator said, "though I've forgotten most of it." He closed his eyes, and bringing up snatches of memory he recited slowly, "Long ago we vowed never to serve the Romans nor anyone else but God. We were the first to revolt and we shall be the last to break off the struggle. Daybreak will end our resistance, but we are free to choose an honorable death with our loved ones. And I think it is God who has given us this privilege that we can die nobly and as free men."

"The site was excavated about fifteen years ago." Mrs. Stein turned to the last page. "And today, right where we're sitting, young Israeli soldiers come to receive their weapons and swear allegiance to the state and the flag with an oath that ends, 'Masada shall not fall again.' " She glanced sharply at her husband, saw that his breathing was steady, his color normal. "Well!" She closed the book and rose briskly to her feet. "I'm rested now. Let's see the sights."

There were many sights to see, starting with a series of rooms where food and wine were stored. Behind and in front of them as they made the circuit were many other tourists, most of them in bands of 20 or more led by a guide. They were on the upper terrace of Herod's palace when Mrs. Stein leaned close to Selena to whisper, "I think you have an admirer. Near the wall at your left. The young man in the yellow shirt."

Selena glanced in the direction indicated, then shook her head. "I've never seen him before."

"He keeps looking this way," Mrs. Stein told her. "I first noticed him when we came out of the synagogue. He was standing near the entrance, almost as if he were waiting for us."

"If he has his eye on either of you girls," the senator joked, "I can only say I admire his taste. But I think it's time we started down. I've worked up quite an appetite."

They descended from the mountain and ate a leisurely lunch in

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the restaurant at its base. They were starting back to the car when members of a tour group caught up with them.

"You're Senator Stein, aren't you?" one of the women asked. "See, Rose, I told you that's who it was. You spoke to our sisterhood luncheon last year and—"

His wife and Selena walked on ahead, leaving him to shake the outstretched hands and answer questions.

"I hope this trip hasn't been too strenuous." Rachel looked back with a frown of concern. "It's so hard to keep him from overdoing."

"You're worried about him, aren't you? Is he ill?"

"Not really. Not if he's careful. He had a heart attack last spring. A mild one, so we were able to keep it out of the papers. The doctor said he'll be fine as long as he follows the rules. A proper diet. Plenty of sleep. No unusual exertion or excitement. It's the last part that's difficult. Dan's used to an active life. But he'll be seventy in a few weeks and he's promised me that when his term ends next year he won't run again."

They reached the car and stood beside it to wait for the senator. He had taken leave of the tour group and was crossing the parking lot when two young men came up behind him. One, Selena noted, was the man in the yellow shirt to whom her attention had been called on the upper terrace. As she watched they caught up with the senator, one moving to his left, the other to his right, so close that the three bodies were almost touching. The yellow-shirted one spoke and when Senator Stein replied, Yellow Shirt's arm went round his back so that he almost seemed to be supporting him. The senator's movements became mechanical, his body stiff, his legs leaden, as if each step was taken under duress.

"Something's wrong." Rachel Stein, alarmed, started forward. "Dan, aren't you feeling all right. What is it?"

"I'm all right, Rachel. Be calm."

There's a gun at his back, Selena thought. Instinctively she moved closer to the other woman and laid a restraining hand on her arm.

"Everybody get in the car," the yellow-shirted man said. His English was precise, the accent faintly British. "Be nice and quiet and nobody will get hurt."

Mrs. Stein shook off Selena's hand and continued her rush forward.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "What are you doing to my husband?"

She was about to throw herself on the spokesman when his com-

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panion stepped forward and grasping her arm, twisted it behind her back to turn her fully around until she was again facing Selena. Tears started in her eyes but did not stop her angry protest. The senator hurled himself on his wife's assailant and the gun was for an instant visible in the second man's hand as he moved close to the entangled trio.

In that instant Selena weighed alternatives. To run for shelter behind the car and summon help by shouting? To take advantage of the gunman's distraction and try to seize his weapon? The restaurant was a long way off and a bus had moved in front of it, cutting off the view of the touring Americans, so the latter option seemed more practical. But as she poised to spring, the senator gave a low moan and sank to the ground.

"Pills," he gasped. "Pocket."

His wife broke free of the young man. He reached out to grab her again but was stopped by his partner.

"Don't hold her, Rahim. The old man needs help. You take care of the other one."

Rahim moved to Selena's side while Mrs. Stein dropped to her knees and quickly took a small bottle of pills from the senator's coat pocket. With trembling fingers she shook out a tiny pellet and placed it on his tongue, then cradled his head on her arm. Selena and the two men watched in silence until the senator opened his eyes and raised his head.

"I'm fine now, Rachel," he said. "No cause to worry."

"Then get in the car," Rahim ordered. "We've wasted enough time."

Selena moved to her friend's side, assisting her to rise, and she, in turn, gave a helping hand to her husband.

"Look at the old man, Abdul," Rahim said. "He's not in shape to drive."

"We'll have to change the plan," Abdul returned. His eyes fixed on Selena. "Can you handle the car?"

"I can drive," she answered. "But if it's money you want—"

"You think we're common robbers?" He drew himself up haughtily. "We are Palestinians and patriots. It is the man we've come for, not his money."

"Then take me." Strength had returned to the senator's voice. "And let the women go."

"Never, Daniel." Rachel clung tightly to his hand. "Whatever they do to you, they must do to me. I'll not be parted from you."

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"Don't worry, lady. We'll keep you all together."

"My husband and I will go with you," she said firmly, "if you'll free our friend. Whatever your plans for us, she shouldn't be involved. She's not even Jewish."

"Then it's her bad luck she's traveling with you. We can't let her loose to call the police, can we? Come on, let's get out of here."

Soon they were all in the car. Rahim sat in back with the Steins as Selena took the wheel with Abdul at her side.

"I have a gun." He spoke matter-of-factly, without menace, as she started the engine. "My partner has a knife. If we need to use them, we will. But if everyone behaves with common sense, you will be treated honorably as prisoners of war. And if all goes well, you will be able to return home alive and unharmed in a very short time. Now, miss, please return to the main highway and then turn right."

Selena did as she was told. The tour bus, its passengers having boarded, followed them on the road leading from Masada. She tried to think of some way to signal them but too soon she reached the highway where, turning south, she watched in the rear-view mirror as the bus went in the opposite direction, back toward Jerusalem. Scanning the dashboard instruments, she confirmed the senator's earlier comment about needing gas. If this was to be a long journey, they'd have to stop and that might provide her with a chance to pass on a message. But for the moment she could only follow orders and keep driving.

It was a silent ride. The Steins exchanged a few words, cut off by Rahim's command to be quiet. Selena darted frequent glances from the road ahead to the instrument panel to see the kilometer numbers mount slowly upward while the needle on the gas gauge hovered near empty. If we do stop, she asked herself, how will I let the attendant know we're in trouble. They won't let me talk to him alone, that's certain. If it were like service stations at home, I could ask to use the restroom and write a note. But out here in the desert, there'll be nothing but a pump. And the man may be an Arab and in sympathy with our captors. But that will be our last chance to call for help, so when the time comes I must be ready.

"Slow down," Abdul broke in on her thoughts. "We're near our turnoff. Yes, here it is. Turn right."

The road to which he directed her was narrow and unpaved, hardly more than a trail. If they met another car, one of them would have to pull off to the side. But they met no one and passed no other signs of life. They were headed, it appeared, into a part of the desert that

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was isolated and uninhabited. The nearly empty gas tank was no longer a good omen. Running out of fuel here might inconvenience the Palestinians, but it would not improve the plight of their victims.

The suspense at any rate was soon ended. She had followed the trail for about ten minutes when she saw ahead, a few yards from the roadside, two goatskin tents. Standing beside them was a man in the flowing robes and headdress of a desert Arab.

"We've arrived," Abdul told her. "Stop the car."

She obeyed, noting as she did so that the needle on the gauge had passed the gauge-line indicating empty. They could probably have traveled only one or two kilometers farther. But that was no longer cause for hope. Instead it meant that, even if there was an opportunity, the car was useless as a means of escape.

The stranger approached and spoke through the window to Abdul.

"Did everything go as planned?"

"Yes. Except that they took someone with them to Masada."

"So we have an extra guest. No problem." He opened the rear door with a bow that was almost courtly. "Senator Stein. Madame. Will you please alight?"

"Who are you?" the senator asked. "Why have you brought us here? What do you hope to gain from kidnaping three United States citizens?"

"A great deal." He answered the final question. "Our hospitality, I fear, is less than you are used to, but you will not have long to endure it. If you get out of the car, I will be pleased to introduce myself and, as far as possible, to satisfy your curiosity."

"It appears we have no choice." The senator climbed from the car, then leaned back to assist his wife. The others followed, forming an awkward group with the three Americans confronting the three Arabs.

"I am Hassan el-Fattah." The speaker was an imposing figure, taller and older than the other two and clearly the one in command. "I shall be your host for as long as it takes for the Jews to comply with our requests."

"So we're hostages," Senator Stein interpreted. "And you're members of a terrorist gang."

"Terrorists or freedom fighters." Hassan shrugged. "It depends, doesn't it, on who is speaking. We are not at war with you, Senator, and we will do our best to make you and your ladies comfortable. Abdul, move the car out of sight. And you, Rahim, can let our com-

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rades know that the first step is accomplished.

The two young men moved quickly. Abdul got back in the car and drove it under an overhanging cliff while Rahim scurried into one of the tents. They must have a short-wave radio, Selena thought. If I can get to the transmitter when no one is watching, maybe I can send an S.O.S. But to whom? Even as the idea formed, she realized its absurdity. This isn't Citizen's Band land. I'd only reach the people with whom Rahim is communicating—a Palestinian command post. There has to be another way to get word to the outside world about what is happening to us.

There's a seven-hour time difference between Israel and Washington, so it was still morning when word was received at the White House that an American senator and his wife had been abducted. The price of their release, according to a message delivered to the American Embassy in Israel, was freedom for five Palestinians who had been jailed for a series of bombings in which nine Israelis had died.

The news, routinely circulated to all intelligence agencies, reached Hugh Pierce in his Georgetown studio. Section Q, the small secret security branch that he headed, was not directly involved, but it was asked to stay alert and contribute any relevant information. That his wife might be in danger did not occur to him. Selena's cable the night before had advised him of her delayed departure and he thought of phoning to tell her about the Steins. But she might take that as encouragement to stay and join in the search. Since he was unwilling to do anything that might delay her homecoming, he took no action but remained in his studio to await developments.

At first there was hope, shared by the Israelis and Americans, that the message was a hoax. This was bolstered by inquiries at the King David hotel from which it was learned that the Steins had set out in the morning on an all-day tour of the Dead Sea area. Tour agencies were checked until a guide was found who reported that several members of his group had actually spoken to Senator Stein after lunch at Masada. There was reassurance in the knowledge that, only a short time before the report of his kidnaping, he had been free and following his intended itinerary.

But it grew late and the Steins did not return to the hotel, and later still, friends whom they had invited to dinner had waited in vain in the lobby. Agents fanned out to question all members of the

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tour who had seen them at Masada. A couple riding in the front seat of the bus recalled following the senator's car back to the highway.

"But he wasn't driving," the woman volunteered. "You remember, Joe, there were three people in the back seat, a woman and two men. I'm sure one of them was Senator Stein. That thick crop of white hair couldn't belong to anyone else."

"That's right," Joe agreed. "We figured he must have a chauffeur."

The rental agency quickly refuted that guess. The senator had hired a car, not a driver, and the hotel porter confirmed that, when the party left the hotel that morning, the senator was at the wheel. So the conclusion was at last unavoidable. The Steins were at the mercy of terrorists and the government was faced with intolerable alternatives.

Even more disturbing to Hugh was information that was included in the report as a minor footnote. Several of the tourists said there were two women lunching with the senator. One they assumed was his wife, the other was much younger. The professional concern that Hugh had felt since the reports began was suddenly raised to white-hot anxiety. If Selena—no, it couldn't be—but she was in Jerusalem and at the same hotel—with a free day—and the Steins were old friends of Selena's parents.

With a hand that was barely steady, Hugh picked up the phone and put through a call to the King David. The wait seemed interminable, and when he was finally connected, the clerk's answers did nothing to quiet his fears. Selena was not in the hotel. The key was in her box, along with a teletype from the airline that had been received at 9:50 a.m. It appeared, therefore, that she had left the hotel soon after breakfast and had not yet returned.

"And in Jerusalem"—Hugh looked in despair at the bright sunshine streaming through his skylight—"in Jerusalem it's nearly midnight."

In the desert Hassan had provided his captives and his two associates with garments like those he was wearing. The road, he explained, led to a long abandoned archeological dig. Now nobody had reason to come within miles of the site. But in case anyone did, or if one of the low-flying Israeli patrol planes passed overhead, they would see a small Bedouin encampment, one of many that dotted the area. As long as they were properly costumed and stayed

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within specific boundaries, the captives were free to roam about or to rest in the smaller tent. It was, Selena realized, perfect camouflage. And to stifle any thought of flight, either Abdul or Rahim—the gun inconspicuous but not invisible—was at all times on guard.

At nightfall Abdul built a wood fire to heat a mixture of lamb chunks and rice which he ladled onto tin plates.

"Eat your fill," Hassan urged them. "We have rations and water for two days. Enough even"—he nodded to Selena "—for an unexpected guest."

"And after two days—" Selena ventured the question.

"We break camp," he said. "They have forty-eight hours to let our brothers go."

His tone was mild but his face, lit by the flickering flames, showed a fanatic determination that made it unnecessary to ask what would happen if the deadline was not met. It was not surprising that none of his guests had much appetite.

At bedtime a new complication appeared. It had been planned to put the Steins in the small tent and the Arabs in the larger one, which also contained the radio equipment. That left no place for Selena.

"I can sleep in the car," she suggested.

"Let both the ladies have the car," the senator said. "The cushions are softer than the ground and they'll be sheltered from the wind."

"But I'd rather stay with you," Mrs. Stein said.

"And let Selena be off by herself?" His quick glance at the other men was meaningful. "No, dear, that's not wise."

"I hope you're not so foolish as to think you can use the car to escape," Hassan said. "You would first need boards to lift the back wheels out of the sand. And of course one of us will be on watch all night. But if, for comfort, you choose the car as a sleeping place, I do not object."

So it was settled. Rachel Stein stretched out on the car's back seat while Selena curled up in the front. At ten o'clock she switched on the car radio and found an English-language news broadcast. The Israeli cabinet, they heard, had been called to an emergency meeting and would probably remain in session through the night to decide on a response to terrorists who held hostage an American senator, his wife, and an as-yet-unidentified female companion. The senator and the two women, according to the announcer, had last been seen when their car, driving away from Masada, had turned south on the road to Sodom.

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"Sodom!" Mrs. Stein exclaimed. "That's appropriate. We couldn't be any harder to find if we had all turned to salt. My dear, I'm so sorry we got you into this."

"We're in it together," Selena answered. "What we need to find is a way out."

But as she lay awake, her mind busy, every avenue of escape seemed blocked. From time to time the sound of wood being placed on the fire or the footsteps of someone walking near the car spoke of their captors' unbroken vigil. Finally, from exhaustion, she slept.

When she woke, the fire was out and the camp dimly lighted by the rising sun. She pulled herself upright in the seat and looked back to see that Rachel was also awake. Rachel's carryall had yielded another book which she was reading with the aid of a miniature flashlight. She looked up to greet Selena.

"I'm sorry if my moving around disturbed you. You seemed so peaceful."

"I hope you were able to get some sleep too."

"Enough." Her eyes went back to the book and she read aloud, " 'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?' "

"The Psalms?"

"Yes. I like to have them with me. Somewhere in here"—she tapped the book's cover—"there are words of strength and solace for every crisis."

They breakfasted on bread and dried fish and then began a long stretch of waiting. Selena, covered from head to foot as a Bedouin woman, roved restlessly about the camp, followed always by the eyes of one of the Arabs. The Steins were more passive, staying close together as if each drew comfort from the other's nearness.

In mid-morning Hassan came out of the communications tent to tell them of a new development. The Israeli government had announced that they could not reach any decision without proof that those making the demands had actually taken Senator Stein and that he and his companions were alive and well.

"So they're ready to deal with us." Hassan was exultant. "You can speak over our radio, Senator. Headquarters will put your voice on tape and play it for the government. If all goes well, our brothers will be in Damascus tonight and you can sleep in real beds. Is that not good news?"

"No," the senator said. "I will not speak on your radio."

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Hassan stared at him in surprise, then he said, "Nobody is asking you to speak in support of our cause. All you have to say is that you and the ladies are our prisoners and that you are well. That's true, isn't it? And the sooner they hear you say so, the sooner we can all go home."

"The Israelis won't give in to blackmail," the senator declared. "They never have. They never will."

"Maybe not before," Hassan conceded. "But our side has never had a United States senator as a bargaining point. You're an important man and a popular one. How do you think the American public, and especially the other senators, will feel if the government here says they'd rather keep a few Palestinians in jail than save your life?"

"Those Palestinians," the senator snapped, "are murderers. If they're released, there'll be more bombs—and then more kidnapings to free the bombers—and on and on in an endless chain of terror. If you need my voice on your radio to convince the world that you have me, then perhaps I've found a way to stop you."

"At what cost, Senator?" Hassan asked. "You may be willing to die for Israel, but what about your wife and her friend? You talk to him, ladies. I'm sure you can persuade him to cooperate and save your lives."

Deliberately he walked away, out of earshot.

"You're right, Dan." Mrs. Stein reached for his hand. "They're counting on outside pressure to weaken Israel's resolve not to deal with terrorists. You must do nothing to help them."

"They won't deal, no matter what I do or say," he answered. "Asking for proof that we're alive—I'm sure that's just a way to gain time, to keep the negotiations open. The Israelis don't ransom hostages, they rescue them."

"Like at Entebbe." Eagerly Rachel seized the hope he held out. "Certainly it should be easier to pluck three people from an open space than it was to invade an airport guarded by soldiers in a hostile country."

"Much easier," Selena agreed. "If only they knew where we are."

"That's the rub," the senator said. "After we left Masada we vanished as if the earth had swallowed us up. I might even make their broadcast if there were some way to sneak in a clue to our location."

"Just say we're disguised as a sheik and his harem not far from the Dead Sea. Can you get that past the censor?"

"Not a chance," he replied. "But it makes an interesting fantasy."

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Their spirits, Selena noted, seemed buoyed by the discussion. Although the hopelessness of their situation had not changed, the senator was no longer a passive figure. By refusing to speak, he had shown himself free to choose, to make a decision and hold to it, to take command of his fate.

"Well, Senator?" Hassan had come back to them. "Have you decided to listen to reason?"

"My position remains the same."

"And it won't change," his wife added.

"You are stupid!" Hassan exploded. "If we don't prove you're alive, your people will think you have already been killed. Then they will have no cause to deal with us."

"That's just how I see it."

"If they don't meet our terms, you will die." His gaze moved slowly around the circle. "All of you. Be sure you understand what you are doing. By refusing to cooperate, you commit suicide."

"And that"—Rachel echoed the words recited on the mountain top—"that can be an honorable death."

The midday meal was again a mixture of lamb and rice. Later Selena went to the car to tune in another news broadcast. She learned that there was no further word from the alleged kidnapers of Senator Stein, but Jerusalem and Washington were in constant consultation about what action to take. She learned also that her own identity had been established. But the announcer's final line was, to her, the most interesting.

"The husband of the third hostage, the well-known American artist Hugh Pierce, arrived today in Jerusalem to await news of his wife."

Hugh! Her heart bounded. Hugh was in Jerusalem. So short a distance away. Hugh would find them. She projected her thoughts northward as if she might, by willing it, force them into his mind. But that's insane. She brought herself back to reality. There was between them a depth of understanding that made them able to convey much in few words. But not, she thought wryly, in no words at all. If I'm to send a message to Hugh, I'll have to use means more substantial than telepathy.

She turned off the radio and weighed the possibilities. Then she left the car to join the Steins who were strolling arm in arm at the other end of the cliff. She asked Mrs. Stein if she might borrow her book of Psalms.

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"Of course, dear. I left it in the car. I hope you'll find a verse to answer your need."

"I'm sure I shall." She returned to the car and began to read. A short time later she went to Hassan who was resting in the sun, his back against a rock outside the larger tent.

"I've been thinking." She sat down beside him. "The senator is determined not to help you. And Mrs. Stein agrees with him. Nothing will change their minds."

"There are ways to persuade people," he said darkly. "I think he would not like to see his wife hurt."

"Oh, no!" She drew back. "You wouldn't—you couldn't!"

"We do whatever is necessary for our cause. I am waiting now for instructions."

"But public opinion is important to your cause too. You've treated us kindly. I can report that to the world when we're free. I'm a journalist."

"I know. The radio told us who you are. Perhaps when you go back you will write that we are not monsters, that we fight only to regain our land."

"But when you threaten to hurt a helpless woman—"

"Her husband will be to blame, if he remains stubborn."

"There's another way. That's what I came to talk to you about. All you need is proof that the three of us are in your custody and well. So why not let me make a tape? I'll say what you want me to say—that Senator and Mrs. Stein and I are well and that you're taking good care of us. If you like, I'll even explain that I'm talking instead of the senator because he'd rather die than help you. People who know the kind of man he is will believe that. Then you'll have no need for his voice."

"Hmm." He frowned, thinking. "Yes, that may serve. I will pass on your proposal and see what the leader thinks. You wait."

In a few minutes he was back. "There is a difficulty," he told her. "The senator's voice is well-known. When he speaks, people recognize him. But if you make a tape, they cannot be sure if it is really you or someone else merely using your name."

"Ah, yes, I see." She did not add that if he had not raised that objection, she herself would have pointed it out to him. She remained silent, her eyes focused on the ground as if in deep thought. "But wait—" She looked up, brightening. "I have an idea. My husband is in Jerusalem. If I add a special message for him, one that he'll know can only come from me, that will solve the problem."

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"What kind of message?"

"I often quote the Bible to him. There's one verse in particular that he'll associate with me."

"I will check."

Again he went into the tent. It was a long time before he returned, but when he did he was beaming his approval. "The leader is pleased that you will work with us," he told her. "He says to tell you that you will not be sorry. Now here is what you must say."

He handed her a slip of paper on which were written three short sentences. She was to identify herself, say that she and Senator and Mrs. Stein were well cared for by Palestinian patriots, and urge the government to save their lives by meeting the demands. "After that," he said, "you say the Bible verse that will make your husband certain it is you."

This time she went into the tent with him and sat quietly while he spun dials to renew radio contact with his headquarters. After a brief exchange in Arabic he handed her the microphone.

"Go ahead. They are ready to start the tape."

She read the message exactly as it was written, then added, "I heard on the radio that my husband is in Jerusalem. Please tell him that I quoted my favorite verse from the Psalms, 'The Lord is in his holy temple, His throne is in heaven. His eyes behold the children of men.' "

While government ministers held round-the-clock sessions at the Knesset, officers of an elite commando unit of the Israeli army met in the basement of a bank a few blocks away. They had planned and practised techniques for air and sea rescues from a wide variety of open and enclosed spaces—airfields and farms, offices, hotels, theaters, schools, houses—every conceivable place where hostages might be taken. But all these preparations were nullified by the total disappearance of the Steins and Selena. Known and suspected members of the Palestinian underground were under strict surveillance, but nothing was discovered. The demand for proof had been made on the chance that, in supplying it, the abductors might make a slip that would reveal their hiding place. But that was another dead end.

The tape bearing Selena's message had been played over the phone to the American ambassador who, in turn, made a tape that was passed to the commandos. Hugh, joining them in the basement, identified his wife's voice but scowled in bafflement as she recited

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her "favorite psalm." They played it several times, hoping to hear background noise that might furnish a clue. But there was nothing. Half of the 48 hours given in the original ultimatum had already elapsed.

"What I need," Hugh said suddenly, "is a rabbi."

The soldiers looked at him, startled, as if suspecting that he had cracked under the strain. But they acceded to his request for one more replay of the tape. He noted Selena's exact words, then went into an adjoining office to use the telephone.

"He may be right," the major commented. "There's not much left to do except pray."

But a short time later Hugh was back in the commando room and the atmosphere was dramatically changed. A large map hung on the wall and Hugh stood beside it with the officers clustered close to watch each movement of his pencil.

"Here—" He tapped the point at which the Masada road joined the main highway. "This is where they were last seen. We know from the tourists that they headed south. So we move along this route not less than eleven and not more than twelve kilometers." He measured carefully and put two dots on the map. "This is where they turned, either left or right."

"A left turn," a lieutenant commented, "would put them in the Dead Sea."

"Correct. So they went to the right. Not less than four or more than five kilometers." From the dots he drew parallel lines into the desert and then, checking his measurements with care, drew a square to enclose an area one kilometer in each direction. "That's where they are."

"We'll do an aerial rec," the major said, "and make sure."

"Be careful," Hugh warned. "If they guess they've been spotted, they may find another hole to hide in."

"We know our job," the Israeli answered. "We won't scare the birds. One pass with a wide telephoto lens will be enough. It will look like a routine desert patrol."

When the plane flew over, Selena was walking with Rachel Stein. She had told them at once about making the tape but had not explained her motive. It was possible that nothing would come of it and she did not want to arouse false hopes. Now Mrs. Stein, concerned that Selena might feel guilty, was trying to reassure her.

"Daniel and I both think you did the right thing," she said. "He

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couldn't help them. It would betray all his principles. But Israel doesn't mean to you what it does to us. And I was worried that they would use force on Dan, torture even. I don't know how long Dan could have held out. With his heart condition, he might—" She broke off, unwilling to complete the thought. "You spared us that, Selena, and I'm thankful. Also it should make the Arabs more friendly to you. In the end, if it comes to that, it may save your life."

"Oh, no! Mrs. Stein, that isn't why I made the tape."

"Of course not!" She was equally emphatic. "My dear, we know you too well to think that for one minute. But if it has that effect—well, it eases my mind to believe that whatever happens to us you'll survive. Daniel and I have lived a long time, the years have been full and happy for us. And there are worse ways to die than for a cause one believes in. But you're young and you were caught up in this by accident. We're to blame for your being here and if harm comes to you—ah, look!" She was distracted by the sound of an approaching plane. "Isn't there some way we can signal, let them know we're here?"

But the plane, staying high in the sky, had passed over them and was gone before she could finish the question.

In the commando room the series of pictures, greatly magnified, was spread out for inspection on a large table.

"A Bedouin family is great cover," the major said, "and all very authentic. "Except for this." He pointed to a shiny surface near the ground close to the cliff. "What do you make it to be?"

"Something metal," his aide answered. "From the shape and location, I'd say it's the end of an auto bumper."

"So we've trapped our birds." The major smiled his satisfaction. "The pictures show five people. Three of ours, two of them."

"There may be one or two others out of sight," the aide suggested.

"Sitting ducks. We'll go in tonight, land behind this hill, and implement Plan D."

"There'll be a dangerous minute or two when we go over the hill," Hugh said. "If they hear us coming, they'll have time to grab one of the hostages to use as a shield."

"We're fast and silent in the dark," the major said. "Anyway, that's a risk we have to take."

"It's a risk we can minimize," Hugh countered. "My wife's tape said she has access to a radio. She told us where they are, so she's

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expecting us to mount a rescue. If I let her know exactly when we're coming, she'll figure a way to put space between them and their guards at the crucial moment. Can you arrange for me to put a message on every English-language newscast for the rest of the day?"

"Are you crazy?" the major asked. "Those fellows speak English. There's no way you can brief our people without tipping off the other side."

"You work out your strategy," Hugh retorted, "and tell me the exact hour and minute you start over the top. Then I'll get word to my girl."

Selena waited impatiently for night to fall. Had Hugh, she wondered, understood her message? How and when would they act on it? Surely not until after dark. Probably in the pre-dawn hours when guards are least alert. By ten o'clock the women were in the car, the senator was in his tent, and Hassan was keeping lonely vigil by the campfire.

Again Selena switched on the radio. Most of the news was repetition. Senator Stein and his party were still missing. The officials were still debating. The public was demanding action.

Then came an announcement that quickened her pulse. "Hugh Pierce, husband of one of the hostages, was interviewed this afternoon. Asked if he had any message for his wife, he replied, 'Only this. Be brave, darling, and remember what the Psalmist said. 'You, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory and the lifter up of my head.' "

"What a sweet thought." Mrs. Stein leaned over the back of the seat to give Selena's shoulder a gentle pat. "I didn't know Hugh was a religious man. But of course in times of trouble—"

"Yes," Selena concurred. "It makes a difference."

With the flashbulb sheltered to show no light outside the car, she scanned the pages of the book of Psalms until she found the passage Hugh had quoted.

"They're coming for us. We must be prepared."

"What shall we do?" Rachel asked.

"Our part is to be out of harm's way. This car is the safest place, so you and I are all right. But we have to find a way to get the senator in here with us without making them suspicious. There's no hurry, though. We've several hours to think about it."

They discussed and made plans, discarded them and devised oth-

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ers, finally arrived at a firm arrangement. Then they were silent, waiting. At midnight Abdul relieved Hassan. The fire burned low, the camp was quiet. The hours dragged on, but neither of the women slept. At last the luminous dial of Selena's watch showed 3:00 A.M.

"It's almost time," she whispered.

"I'm ready," Mrs. Stein replied. "Just tell me when to start."

She watched the second-hand sweep round.

3:01.

3:02.

"Now!" Selena said.

"Oh-o-oh!" Rachel broke the silence with a long drawn-out cry of pain. "Daniel, help me!"

"What's going on?" Abdul, dozing by the fire, sprang to his feet.

"Rachel, what is it?" The senator burst from his tent but was caught and held back by Abdul.

"It's Mrs. Stein." Selena called across the open space. "Chest pains—her heart. Her husband has pills."

"Let him go to her, Abdul." Hassan came out of the other tent. "We don't want the old lady to die on us."

Released, the senator hurried toward the car. Mrs. Stein pushed open the back door.

"Rachel, what—"

"I'm all right, Dan. Get in. Hurry!"

He scrambled in beside her. Selena pulled the door shut, pressed down the lock. Hassan at a more leisurely pace was moving toward the car.

"What's this all about?" the senator asked. "Why—?"

Before he could say more there was a sound of movement on the hill to their right. A rock, dislodged by running feet, rolled to the bottom. Hassan whirled around, drawing his gun. Then a spotlight shone in his eyes, blinding him, and other lights illuminated the whole camp.

"Drop your guns," a voice out of the darkness ordered. "You're surrounded."

Hassan fired toward the light but an answering shot struck his arm and the gun fell to the ground. Abdul and Rahim were less militant. Within a few minutes the commandos were in the camp and had taken the three men prisoners. The Steins and Selena emerged from the car.

"Senator Stein?" The major introduced himself and his unit. "I hope you and the ladies are all right."

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"We're fine, young man. And very grateful to you. That was a remarkable performance."

"Standard operating procedure," he replied. "There's a helicopter waiting to take you to Jerusalem."

Selena, spotting a familiar figure behind the major, had not listened to their exchange. Only when Hugh's arms were tightly around her was she able to release the emotion that she had, for 36 hours, held so tightly in check.

Later, riding in the helicopter, they reviewed what had happened.

"It was like a miracle!" Mrs. Stein exclaimed. "The way they suddenly swooped down and set us free. But what I don't understand"—she turned to Hugh—"how did you know where to find us?"

"Selena sent me a message."

"I watched the odometer while I was driving to the camp," Selena explained. "It showed a little over eleven kilometers south and about four west. When they let me tape a message, I added a verse from the Psalms."

"Psalm 11, verse 4," Hugh said. "As soon as a Bible scholar identified the passage, I had the numbers I needed."

"And the quotation Hugh sent back—Psalm 3, verse 4—told me when to expect them."

"Then the commandos," Hugh concluded, "did the rest. It was a by-the-book rescue operation."

"Exactly," Selena echoed. "Rescue by the Book."

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a *NEW* Simon Ark story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

The Simon Ark stories might be called a blend of fantasy and reality—a quality we associate with many of G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories; but as in the Chesterton tales, reality wins in the end. Simon Ark may claim to be two thousand years old, he may talk in an old-fashioned and cryptic way, but he treats mysteries as problems of today, and he keeps his feet firmly on twentieth-century ground—even when the murderer seems to be a mythological god . . . Would more than one hundred cosmonauts and astronauts die before Christmas Day, all from lightning bolts unleashed by Thor, the thunder god? . . .

THE AVENGER FROM OUTER SPACE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Neither Simon Ark nor I was in on the beginning of it, but the way we pieced it together later it must have started something like this . . .

It was late summer in the *dacha* community outside Moscow, where country homes in the woods served as the state's reward for a job well done. This was a *dacha* of scientists, and Valery Feokarov—long returned from the journey that had made him famous—enjoyed the companionship of these other renowned figures. The country house given him by the state was large by Russian standards, and quite comfortable. The wide expanses of glass in the corner sunroom gave a lovely view of the thick summer greenery outside, making it almost a part of the décor. And Feokarov's wife especially liked the big back yard with its swings and play area for the children.

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On this day he had gone out alone to stroll in the woods behind the house, as he often did when he was thinking. He'd reached the top of a small hill and paused beneath a majestic pine tree that was far older than he was. Looking up at its soaring grandeur he was reminded of the Space Exploration Obelisk in Moscow, which he'd helped dedicate in 1964. Those had been the good days before his forced retirement. He missed those days, though he still had the companionship of those who had shared his adventure.

He gazed off toward the horizon, watching the high black clouds moving in. He knew the signs of an approaching storm by now, after all those mornings spent at the launch site in the Ural Mountains. He wondered if he should—

At that instant there was a flash he barely saw, and Valery Feokarov became the first of them to die.

Eight days later, on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend, David Woodword met Lisa Blake at the private marina on the west shore of Galveston Bay. Since the breakup of his marriage three years earlier, Lisa had done more for him than any psychiatrist could have. She had tended to his needs unselfishly, never once asking when he might be free to marry her. She was everything he could ask for, and this day in her white shorts and striped shirt she seemed more lovely than ever before.

He bent to kiss her and then climbed on board the cabin cruiser that was his biggest luxury. "Come on, let's get her out of here. They're predicting scattered thundershowers for later and I'd like to get a couple of hours on the water at least."

"Am I late?" she asked, hopping in beside him.

"No, no! Cast off the line, will you?"

He let the boat drift away from the dock a bit before he switched on the engine. Then they took off, skimming across the waves with a burst of energy that reminded him of the old days on the Cape. Nothing could really match that, of course, but the thrill he felt here on the water came close.

"Did you see Milly and the kids today?" Lisa asked.

"No. She's letting me have them tomorrow for a picnic." He twisted the wheel to starboard. "Shall we head for our cove?"

"Sure!"

They called it their secret cove, though in truth there were no secrets anywhere along the shoreline of Galveston Bay. Still, a stand of trees here shielded them from the nearest house, and it was the closest thing to seclusion to be found anywhere on the industrialized

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bay. He turned their craft gently toward shore, negotiating the familiar waters until they began to edge smoothly into the cove.

Then suddenly he cursed. "What in hell is this?"

"What is it, David?" she called from the stern.

He bent over the side toward the water. "There's something—"

She saw a blinding flash of light, and David Woodword became the second of them to die.

The first thing I knew about it was a phone call from my brother-in-law, Ray Constance. Shelly's brother was a year older than I, crowding 50, and had a big job in Houston with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. I hadn't seen him since a family gathering the Christmas before last, and hearing his voice on the phone in my New York office alarmed me a bit. "What is it, Ray? Family all right?"

"What? Oh, sure, they're great. I'm calling on business."

"If you're ready to write your book, Neptune would be happy to publish it." That was a running joke between us.

But Ray was dead-serious. "You remember about twenty years ago, when I was at that guided missile test range in the desert and you brought an old guy named Simon Ark out to solve a murder?"

"I remember."

"Shelly tells me you still see him from time to time. He must be a hundred years old by now!"

"Two thousand, according to him. Why are you asking?"

"I've got something he might help us on, if he's around."

"Sometimes he drops out of sight for years at a time, but I think he's still in New York at the moment. I'll try to reach him."

"Call me back, will you? If he's available the government will fly you both to Houston this afternoon."

"It's that important?"

"We think so."

"I'll see what I can do."

I knew Simon had lingered in New York after our last adventure to pursue some studies into astral projection. I was lucky enough to reach him at the first number I tried. He listened quietly, then said, "I imagine it concerns the deaths of those two astronauts."

"I hadn't thought of that." Yesterday's paper had carried an article on David Woodword, killed by lightning just eight days after Russian cosmonaut Valery Feokarov died in a similar manner.

"The coincidence seems to justify an investigation," Simon re-

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marked. "I might be interested in a trip to Houston."

"This afternoon?"

"My research is not going well. A bit of mental stimulation seems called for. Arrange for the flight, and I will meet you at the airport."

For once my impending absence from home did not upset Shelly. Since Simon and I were going to Houston at her brother's request, there was little she could object to. I promised to phone her that evening, then I called Ray back to say we were coming.

He was waiting at the Houston airport to greet us late that afternoon. Ray was still slim and boyish despite the flecks of gray in his hair, and he asked me at once about Shelly. They'd always been a close family despite the separation of 1600 miles.

"Shelly is fine," I assured him, sliding into the official-looking limousine he'd provided. "We missed seeing you last Christmas."

"This year for sure! If you can't get down here I'll bring the family to New York."

"Tell us what this is all about."

"Wait till we reach my office," he said. "I want our medical officer, Colonel Byers, to sit in on the meeting."

We headed southeast along route 45, then turned off into the sprawling complex of buildings that was the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center, NASA's Houston headquarters. Ray's office was a plush affair on the top floor of the tallest office building. I didn't need the sign on the door to tell me he'd come a long way from that missile-testing range.

"Sending men to the moon now, are you?"

"*And* bringing them back." He walked over to a model on a desk by the window. "But now we're more interested in the space shuttle."

Simon Ark grew impatient. "About the man who died—"

"David Woodword. He was on the final moon mission. But come, I want Colonel Byers in on this." We walked down the antiseptic hallway to a smaller office on the same floor. An Air Force Colonel in full uniform greeted us, rising from behind a cluttered desk on which I could see color photographs of a wife, two children, and a yacht. Byers was a friendly middle-aged man, one who looked as if he'd gone as far as he ever would in his career.

We shook hands all around and Ray did the introductions. "Colonel Byers, one of our top medical officers and the personal physician to several of the astronauts. He was the first to examine Woodword and the others when they splashed down after the moon flight."

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Byers fingered his graying sideburns as he glanced at his notes. "I helped with the autopsy," he explained. "Death was due to electric shock. No doubt about it."

Simon shifted his bulk into one of the chairs and asked, "Were there thunderstorms in the area as the papers reported?"

Ray Constance answered that one. "They were twenty miles away. No one, including the girl in the boat with Woodword, heard any thunder."

Byers went back to his notes. "There was a severe burn on his right hand, obviously caused by electric shock. Something fouled the boat and Woodword reached in with both hands to remove it. He hesitated, then grabbed it with his right hand—and there was a flash of electricity. This woman, Lisa Blake, saw it."

Simon grunted. "So your conclusion is—?"

"He wasn't killed by lightning but by a powerful electric shock."

"Was any wire found in the water?"

Ray shook his head. "Not a thing."

"If it was removed afterward—" I speculated.

Ray nodded, reading my thoughts. "That would imply a deliberate act."

"Murder," Simon Ark said. He was never one to mince words. "What about the Russian?"

"Valery Feokarov, one of their retired cosmonauts. He made seventy-nine orbits of earth on one of the Soyuz missions. The report is that he was struck by lightning while walking in the woods. We're trying to get more details but you know how the Russians are about releasing information."

Simon nodded. "But you must have something besides a phantom wire in the water to fly us out here so urgently. What else is there?"

Colonel Byers looked unhappy and Ray took his time answering, as if choosing his words with care. "The FBI is investigating all this, of course. We called them in yesterday. But there are some aspects of this affair that trouble us. Some aspects which might better be investigated by someone like you, Simon."

"Such as?"

"A man named Conrad Blaze warned us two weeks ago that all of our astronauts were doomed—threatened by an avenger out of space who would destroy them for having ventured too far from earth."

"You certainly didn't listen to that nonsense!" I said.

"Of course not. But yesterday he phoned me at home and repeated

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the warning. Said that Feokarov and Woodword were only the first two to die. He said by Christmas they'd all be dead—Russians and Americans alike."

"How many would that be?" Simon asked quietly.

"Beginning in 1961, with Gagarin for the Russians and Shepard for us, there have been sixty Russians and forty-four Americans—one-o-four in all. Males, of course, except for Valentina Tereshkova."

"The Russians may have more than sixty," Colonel Byers added. "We think they launched a new Soyuz mission yesterday which they haven't yet announced."

Simon had picked up a pencil and was making marks on a sheet of notepaper. "Over one hundred people who must be guarded, if you believe this man Conrad Blaze."

"If we really believe him," Ray said, "guarding them will do no good. Death will come like a bolt from the blue."

"For David Woodword it may have been more like a bolt from a live wire." Simon put down his pencil. "Is this man Blaze here in Houston?"

"Yes. He imagines himself to be something of a minor prophet, speaking around town on the evils of the space program."

"Does he have any connection with the astronauts?"

"None at all. As far as I can determine, none of them ever laid eyes on him—except maybe on television."

"I will want to see Conrad Blaze," Simon decided suddenly, getting to his feet.

"I was hoping you would," Ray said. "You just might get further than the FBI."

As we were leaving the office I glanced down at the paper Simon had been doodling on. A lightning bolt, made up of three short lines. Underneath, he'd turned it on its side so it resembled the letter Z. Then he'd reassembled the three lines to look like the letter K. I wondered what, if anything, it meant to him.

When we reached a rundown part of Houston populated mainly by Mexican-Americans, it became obvious that the man we sought had acquired no great wealth from his single-minded campaign against space exploration. Conrad Blaze lived in a ramshackle building where the grass out front had long ago been worn away by the playing of children. We passed a few of them on the way in, and Simon paused to pat one brown-skinned girl on the head.

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Blaze's apartment was on the top floor and he answered the door at once, almost as if he'd been expecting us. "More FBI?" he asked accusingly. Then, seeing Simon, he pointed a bony finger. "You're too old for FBI. Who are you?"

"Could we talk inside, Mr. Blaze?" Simon suggested.

He turned away from the door and we entered a large loft-like room decorated with colorful banners covered with mystic symbols. I half expected Conrad Blaze to put on a wizard's cape before speaking with us, but he remained as he was—a white-haired man in his late fifties whose deep blue eyes carried a spark that might have been genius or madness.

"You all come to see me now, don't you?" he said, spinning around to sit suddenly facing us on a faded sofa. "No one would listen two weeks ago when I warned NASA. Now the killings have begun, and one hundred shall die before Christmas Day."

Simon Ark sat down opposite him and softly asked, "Who is killing them, Mr. Blaze?"

"The avenger, that's who! Call him what you will—Thor, the thunderer, was the name the Scandinavians gave him. He is the strongest of gods and men, hurling lightning bolts from the heavens at all who would invade his sacred territory."

"Do you worship Thor?" Simon asked.

"On his day, each week, I give an offering."

"Thor's day. Thursday. But these two men did not die on Thursday."

"The avenger is always with us," Blaze replied.

"Would you kill for him?" Simon asked. "Would you carry out his mission here on earth?"

Conrad Blaze smiled. "Are you asking if I killed those two men? Of course I didn't! Do not try to punish the messenger for the bad news that he carries."

"When will the next killing come?"

"Soon, soon."

"Here or in Russia?"

"Those who rode into space are scattered to all corners of the earth. One is a Senator in Washington. Another heads a large corporation. Thor's bolt could fall anywhere."

"Have you ever met any of the astronauts?" Simon asked.

"I only know them as names in the media. They are our heroes, and every generation has sacrificed its heroes. We will learn, the hard way, that the place for man is only on earth."

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I could see we'd get nothing more from this strange man, and I was pleased when Simon finally rose to leave. "Your warnings came at an inappropriate time," he told Conrad Blaze. "They came at a time when they were true."

Outside it had grown dark. Night had slipped up on us without warning.

In the morning, which was the Wednesday after Labor Day, Ray had arranged for us to accompany him to a memorial service for David Woodword. Afterward we went to one of the other astronaut's homes for coffee. Our host was Sky Hardy, who'd been on the Apollo mission along with Woodword when they made the seventh moon landing. He was a tall lanky man with an easygoing personality. Still, it was clear that Woodword's death had deeply disturbed him.

"Imagine going to the moon and back to die in some freak accident on Galveston Bay!" he said as he helped his wife pour the coffee.

"It might not have been a freak accident," Ray told him. "The FBI is looking into it."

"You mean he was killed by someone?"

"We just don't know."

They were interrupted by a moon-faced woman who was introduced as Milly Woodword. She'd been divorced from the dead man since shortly after his moon mission, but she had attended the funeral with his children. Perhaps, I thought, she'd come to see if Woodword's latest woman friend turned up. But according to Ray there was no sign of Lisa Blake at the services.

"He was always foolhardy," Milly Woodword said. "Just the sort to go out on the bay in a thunderstorm."

"The storm was some miles away at the time," Ray reminded her.

She seemed to ignore him and kept right on. "I told him he should never have joined the astronaut program. Astro*nuts,* that's what you all were! I think he joined just to get as far away from me as possible."

"You know that's not true, Milly," a soothing voice insisted. It belonged to another of the astronauts, Pete Saunders. I remembered he'd been the third man aboard Apollo 19, the one who had remained in orbit while Woodword and Hardy walked on the surface of the moon. Saunders was quieter than Sky Hardy, and he had a solemn, pained expression which might have been merely his reaction to Woodword's death.

"You're just another one of them," Milly Woodword told him. "What were you running from, Pete?"

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He shook his head and didn't answer. They all seemed to realize she was beyond reason. I gazed out the sliding glass doors at the back-yard pool while Sky Hardy went for more coffee. Milly cornered Ray and started in about Woodword's insurance policy.

"The money goes to his children," Ray explained patiently. "You know he removed you as beneficiary after the divorce."

"What about the things he took along to the moon?" she demanded. "The coins and stamps. They're worth a fortune!"

Ray tried to reason with her. "After the problems on some earlier flights we made a rule. They couldn't carry anything like stamps on which they could make a personal profit. You know that, Milly."

"I don't know anything of the sort! Everyone did it and you know it as well as I do!"

But Ray shook his head. "They showed me their personal kits after splashdown. They had nothing but a few family souvenirs."

Sky Hardy interrupted. "This is hardly the time to be arguing about it. Milly, maybe you'd better leave now."

She started to turn her fury on him. "Are you ordering me out of your house?"

"Milly, how long have we known each other?"

She didn't bother to answer, or to react to his attempt at conciliation. Instead she turned on her heel and strode out of the house. Sky Hardy merely shook his head. "She's a sick woman," he said to Saunders. "Has been, ever since the divorce."

Milly's appearance had dampened the already solemn proceedings even further, and most of the guests departed soon afterward. Driving back into Houston, Ray told Simon and me, "We really live in a little world all our own here. The breakup of a marriage affects everyone."

"What about this woman Woodword was seeing?" Simon asked. "The one who was with him when he died."

"Lisa Blake. She's young and quite attractive. A commercial artist. Never been married, though she's lived with guys off and on. She met Woodword at a party shortly after his divorce."

"I will want to see her," Simon told him.

"Certainly." Ray glanced at his watch. "Look, I have to get back to NASA. We're trying to get a call through to the Russian space agency about this matter. But you two can drive out to see her. I'll give you the address and drop you back at your car." It was NASA's car, really, one that Ray had lent us. "Frankly, I'm a bit surprised she wasn't at the services."

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After Ray dropped us off we had a quick lunch and headed into downtown Houston to the Washington Avenue address he'd given us. Lisa Blake's modest apartment also served as the studio for her free-lance art business. We found her hunched over a drawing board when we obeyed the dictum on the door to ring and walk in.

"Be with you in a minute," she called out. We stood there a bit awkwardly, looking over the fashion illustrations and catalogue covers that were pinned to the walls in a haphazard manner.

When she joined us I introduced Simon and myself, telling her I was Ray's brother-in-law. She looked at both of us coolly, studying us with deep blue eyes that could have drowned a man. She was certainly attractive—and talented too, judging by the samples of her artwork.

"It's about David, isn't it?"

"Yes," Simon admitted. "You were not at the memorial services this morning."

"I couldn't face his ex-wife. I preferred to do my mourning in private. Who are you—detectives? I've already talked to the FBI."

"We're helping Ray with NASA's personal investigation," I answered vaguely.

Simon Ark smiled slightly, perhaps to put her at ease, and asked, "Could you tell us everything that happened up to the moment of the tragedy?"

"Very little happened, really. We were out for a cruise in his boat and we headed for a little cove where we often went. Just as we were entering the cove, something in the water seemed to foul the boat. David leaned over the side and—"

"Were there electrical storms in the area?"

She shook her head emphatically. "It was just beginning to cloud up. Whatever killed him came from the water, not from the sky."

"An electrical wire?"

"It could have been, but the police found nothing in the water."

"Could someone have been watching you from the shore and turned on the power when David touched the wire? Then, after he was dead, the power could have been shut off and the wire pulled away."

"I suppose it's possible. We were only about thirty feet from shore. But how would anyone know we were going there?"

"David knew, and you knew," Simon pointed out.

"Do you think I killed him?"

"You said it was a cove where you often went. How many others knew about it?"

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"No one."

"Could someone have followed you, or seen you there on a prior occasion?"

"Anything's possible, I suppose," she admitted with a shrug.

Before Simon could ask anything else, her telephone rang and she went to answer it. She listened, then handed the phone to me. "It's your brother-in-law, Ray Constance. He wants you."

I wondered what was important enough for him to track us down at Lisa Blake's apartment. "What is it, Ray?"

"Sky Hardy's been killed. Electrocuted in his swimming pool. You and Simon had better get out there right away."

The place was a madhouse by the time we reached it. Ray had beaten us there in his car and he was arguing with a husky motorcycle cop who tried to bar the front door. Finally Sky Hardy's wife appeared from somewhere and allowed us to enter. She'd been crying and looked terrible. Pete Saunders was with her, doing his best to comfort her.

Ray called him aside. "What in hell happened, Pete?"

"Most everyone had gone home and Sky said he needed a swim to relax. He changed into his trunks and dove into the pool. We heard a scream and saw a flash from the water. Somehow a power line that runs overhead broke and fell into the pool. By the time we managed to get him out he was dead. If the shock didn't kill him it probably stunned him enough to drown him."

Simon moved onto the rear terrace, toward the oval in-ground pool we'd only glimpsed before. Several detectives and police officers were there, along with power company linemen. We could see where the wire had fallen, from a wooden pole at the back of the property. It had caught just the edge of the pool, but that had been enough.

"How'd it happen?" Ray asked a detective who seemed to be in charge.

"We think the wire was cut with one of those long poles you use to trim branches. Whoever did it would have been hidden from view behind those bushes. We found a branch trimmer in the next yard, with its shaft wrapped in rubber to insulate it."

"Any suspects?"

The detective nodded. "Picked up somebody on the next street. He doesn't live in the neighborhood and he was acting suspicious."

We followed Ray and the detective around the house to the street. A police car was parked halfway down the block with their prisoner

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handcuffed in the back seat. It was Conrad Blaze.

"Let me talk to him," Simon suggested. "We got along well last night."

That wasn't precisely true, but the detective seemed agreeable. "Five minutes. And stay in the front seat."

Simon slid awkwardly into the squad car and turned to Blaze. "Hello, Conrad. Remember me from last evening?"

"I remember you."

"Sky Hardy is dead. That's number three."

"There'll be more."

"Did you kill him, Conrad?"

"He was killed by a bolt from Thor, like the others!"

"This time it looks as if Thor had some human assistance down here on earth. What were you doing in the neighborhood?"

Conrad Blaze was silent for a moment. He seemed to be sizing us up. Finally he said, "I wanted to see someone."

"Who?"

"None of your damned business!"

"*Did* you see anyone? Did you see the killer?"

"I saw only Thor, riding the thunderheads, wreaking his vengeance on those below."

Simon sighed and motioned to me to help him out of the front seat. "We must go about this in another way," he said.

"Do you think he's guilty?"

"My friend, each of us is guilty of something. Conrad Blaze is no exception." Then he asked the detective, "Will he be locked up?"

"At least overnight. Then we'll see if we've got anything on him."

"Very well." Simon turned away, as if dismissing all thought of Blaze from his mind. He asked Ray, "Did you manage to speak with the Russians?"

Ray nodded. "Talked with their top man in charge of the Cosmonauts. He speaks English quite well. From what he tells me there's no hint of foul play over there. Feokarov was out walking in the woods. He was on top of a hill, standing beneath a tall pine tree, when the first lightning bolt of an approaching storm hit the tree."

Simon Ark smiled. "Clearly one of Thor's thunderbolts."

"What do you think, seriously?" Ray asked.

"I think there'll be more killings unless we get to the bottom of this quickly."

I imagined that Simon would want to return to our hotel after

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that, but he fooled me. As soon as we were in the car he said, "We have some unfinished business with Lisa Blake."

"What?"

"I want to see the young woman again. Right now."

She was surprised at our return, and I had the impression she might have been on her way out somewhere. "I thought we were finished with questions," she said.

Simon Ark stepped around her before she could shut the door. "There was one matter we didn't cover earlier."

"What was that?" she asked, suddenly afraid.

"The matter of Conrad Blaze. He's your father, isn't he?"

I was dumfounded by his accusation. Nothing in the investigation thus far had even hinted at such a relationship, and I was prepared for her instant denial. Instead, she turned pale and stammered, "I—I don't know what you mean."

"I believe you do, Miss Blake." Simon was in command now, crumpling her defenses with his hard, logical words. "You both have the same deep blue eyes, you know. And even before I met either of you I was intrigued by the similarity between the names Blake and Blaze. The three strokes of the pen needed for a printed K could easily be shifted to a Z. *Blaze* is the sort of name someone named Blake might choose, especially if he imagined himself a prophet of heavenly fire. Of course he could have been an uncle, or some more distant relative—but then why wouldn't you mention the relationship? I took a chance on calling him your father, and your face tells me I was correct."

"Who are you—some sort of devil?"

"Hardly that," Simon replied. "Only a man who has lived long enough to have witnessed every form of deception. Tell me now, about your father."

"There's nothing to tell."

"The police might feel differently. They're holding him in a cell at this moment, on suspicion of killing Sky Hardy."

"My God!"

"You must tell me what you know about this business. Now!"

She glanced at me, as if seeking some sort of escape, but there was nothing I could offer her. "All right," she said at last. "Conrad Blaze is my father. My mother died in a plane crash and he was always a little crazy on the subject of flying. Living here in Houston, he gradually zeroed in on the space program. He built it into a

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mystical, religious sort of thing. In a way that was responsible for my meeting David Woodword."

"Tell me about it."

"David was in the papers because of the divorce. Milly was really a shrew and she made life hell for him with the press. My father tried to see David, to tell him the divorce was punishment for having ventured into forbidden space. He never reached David, but some reporters talked to him and splashed the story in the papers. I was so embarrassed by the incident I phoned David to apologize, and a few weeks later I sought him out at a party." She smiled a bit at the memory. "He told me I wasn't responsible for the sins of my father and of course he was right. After that I started dating him, and I ignored my father's eccentricities."

"What about last Sunday on the boat? Could your father have been hiding on shore watching you? Could he have charged the wire as David reached out to pluck it from the water?"

"I—I don't know." But something seemed to return to her memory. "Now that I think of it, someone could have been watching us from the shore. David started to reach both hands into the water and then he hesitated, as if seeing something among the trees. Then he reached in with just his right hand—" Her voice broke a bit. "And then I saw the flash. I hadn't remembered that till this minute."

Simon nodded. "A bare electric wire, strung across the entrance to the cove, with the current controlled by someone on shore—someone who knew you'd be coming there. Did your father know?"

"Certainly not! I hadn't even seen him in months."

"But he might have followed you there on an earlier occasion."

"So might anyone else. There were always other boats on the bay. We'd frequently see other NASA people there." She was growing impatient. "Are you going to keep up this questioning all day?"

"No. No, those are all the questions."

When we were outside once more I asked Simon, "Do you think she's telling the truth?"

"Mainly the truth, my friend. The truth as she knows it. Let us return to our hotel."

After the events of the day I expected a quiet evening before our investigation resumed. But the fates conspired against us. We returned from dinner to find a message to phone my brother-in-law.

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When I reached him, Ray said, "The police have just released Conrad Blaze."

"So soon? I thought they'd hold him overnight."

"They planned to, but a lawyer showed up and got him out. Said he'd been hired by Blaze's daughter. I didn't know he had a daughter."

"Yes. Well, we just discovered it ourselves." I could imagine Lisa Blake, overcome with guilt, phoning a lawyer as soon as we left her apartment.

Simon, who'd caught the drift of the conversation, reached over to take the phone. "Ray, this is Simon Ark. Where is Conrad Blaze now?"

"We have no idea, Simon," I heard Ray answer.

"Very well. Stay close to the telephone. There may be a break in the case tonight."

Ray started to ask something else, but Simon hung up. "A break?" I asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that with Blaze out of jail the killer might strike again very quickly."

"You think Blaze did it? But—"

"There's no time for questions now. We must hurry."

I went along with him, as I had so many times in the past, and followed his direction to one of the suburban homes in the tract where many of the astronauts lived. "Whose place is this, Simon?" I asked as we drew up before the house. "We're about a block from Hardy's home."

"If the Houston telephone directory can be relied upon this is the residence of Pete Saunders, the third man on that moon flight."

Saunders himself answered the door and seemed surprised to see us. He was alone in the house and mumbled something about his family being away. "It's you we want to see," Simon told him.

He led us into a large living room with a fireplace that was ablaze despite the moderate temperature. "Ever since Sky was killed this afternoon I've had a chill," he explained. "My God, both of them gone within a few days! Maybe there is something to this idea of a vengeance from outer space."

"Do you believe that Thor cuts power lines?"

"Something sure happened to them."

"I am seeking a more human motive," Simon told him. "Greed. Financial gain."

"What do you mean?" Saunders asked nervously, brushing a hand

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through his hair. It had grown dark outside, but only the firelight illuminated the room.

"I think you know." Simon seemed to tower above him at that moment, like some Old Testament prophet. "Woodword's ex-wife Milly mentioned something about it earlier today. You carried some coins or stamps to the moon, didn't you? Contrary to regulations."

"I know nothing about it."

"I think you do. You three were in it together and not even your families knew about it—except that Woodword let something slip to Milly before their divorce. Whatever it is you took, it has great value today. That was proved by the stamps brought back by previous astronauts. In your case, as the last moon flight for some decades, the value might be even greater. I believe it was great enough to turn one person to murder."

"But the Russian, Feokarov!" Saunders protested.

"The Russian was killed by lightning. A true accident, but it planted the idea in the killer's head. Astronauts could die too, and even if their deaths didn't pass as accidents, they'd be connected with the Russian somehow. The police would suspect an international conspiracy rather than personal gain. You see, with Woodword dead these valuable objects became yours and Hardy's. With Hardy dead, they're all yours."

"I didn't kill them!" he shouted. "You have no right to accuse me!"

"But you brought back—what?"

He slumped down before the fire, his head bowed. "Coins. One hundred Eisenhower silver dollars with the reverse showing an American eagle landing on the moon. Each was in a sealed packet stating it had been to the moon, and signed by the three of us."

"Where—" Simon began, but he was cut short by the ringing of the doorbell.

"I'll get that," Pete Saunders said, and was on his feet before we realized it.

"No!" Simon shouted. "Don't open that door!"

Saunders hesitated, his hand on the knob, as Simon hurried forward. The flickering firelight made our shadows dance across the opposite wall, and in that moment I might have believed in a demon or a god waiting outside.

"I'm not afraid," Saunders said, and opened it.

Conrad Blaze stood there, pointing his arm at them. "Thor will destroy all who trespass in space! A thunderbolt will claim you as it has the others!"

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And then Simon Ark was out there, facing Blaze, as a magician of old might have confronted another. "Get back!" he warned Saunders and me. "Get back if you value your lives!"

"You can't stop me!" Blaze said.

"Yes, I can." Simon shoved him aside with a push of his hand, then walked out beyond him. "Now we meet," he said, speaking into the darkness. "Now, Thor, where are your thunderbolts?"

Saunders found the switch for the outdoor spotlights and turned them on. A man dressed in black stood among the bushes, holding this time not a wire but only a prosaic black pistol which Simon plucked from his hand while the spotlight blinded him. I recognized the man even without his uniform.

It was Colonel Byers.

Though it was nearly midnight by the time we assembled back at Ray's NASA office, I knew we'd be getting no sleep till we heard the story from Simon Ark.

"There's very little to tell," he said, pacing the floor in his best scholarly manner. "One hundred silver dollars were heavy—about five pounds—and they couldn't be easily hidden as those stamps had been on the earlier moon flights. So to avoid detection the three astronauts arranged to pass them to the first person they'd be alone with after splashdown—the doctor who did the preliminary examination on them. Colonel Byers easily carried the coins away in his bag, before they opened their personal kits for you, Ray. The hundred silver dollars—worth thousands of dollars each to collectors —remained in Byers's possession for safekeeping until the astronauts felt the time was right to begin selling them on the world coin markets."

Ray cursed softly. "How could Byers do a thing like that?"

"Better men have done shadier things for money. Perhaps he felt there was nowhere else to go in the military. Perhaps he saw private contractors growing rich and wanted some money for himslf. In any event, after Conrad Blaze issued his crazy warning and the Russian cosmonaut was coincidentally killed by lightning, he decided the coins could all be his. With the three astronauts all mysteriously killed, they'd be worth more than ever.

"He'd seen Woodword and his girl in the cove on Galveston Bay, and he must have figured they'd go there sometime over Labor Day weekend. He rigged a bare electric wire just on the surface of the water and waited to throw the switch. Killing Sky Hardy in his pool

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couldn't have been planned far in advance. He simply saw his opportunity and took it. With Blaze released from jail I feared he'd try to finish the job tonight by killing Saunders in such a way that Blaze would be accused. He got Blaze out there somehow, but this time he had to settle for a gun as the weapon."

"You didn't seem surprised that it was Byers," I commented.

"Very little surprises me at my age," Simon replied. "There were three things pointing toward Byers. First, if the astronauts brought back something from space and passed it to another person, he was the logical one since he was the first doctor to examine them. Second, the killer had to know Woodword went to that cove. Lisa told us they saw other NASA people out sailing. She didn't say other astronauts but other NASA people. And Byers kept a color photo of a yacht on his desk, leading me to correctly assume he was a yachtsman. Third, and perhaps most important, Byers told us Woodword *started* to reach into the water with *both* hands. Lisa didn't remember that detail until today. The only way Byers could have known it was if he'd been watching the whole thing. He was watching, and he killed Woodword."

Ray nodded. "I'll get word to the Russians that we've cleared this up. I can't thank you enough for your help, Simon."

There was a full moon out as we drove back to our hotel, and I said to Simon, "It's still up in the sky. There was no avenger out of space after all."

"Not yet, my friend," he agreed, "but some day—who knows?"

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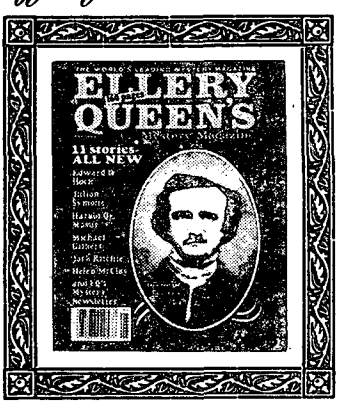

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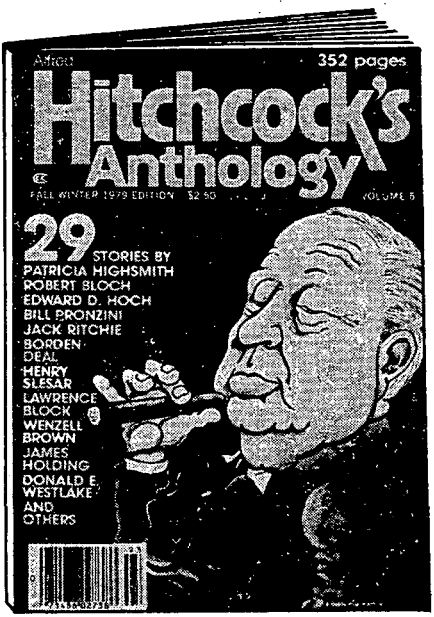

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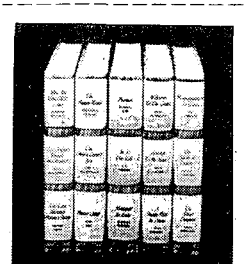

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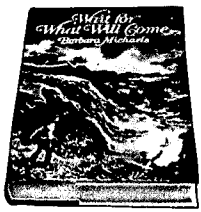

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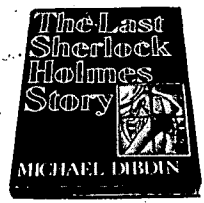

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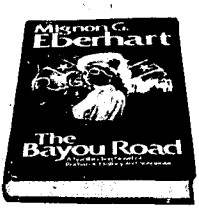

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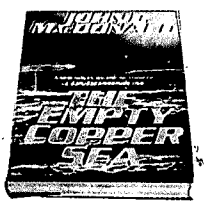

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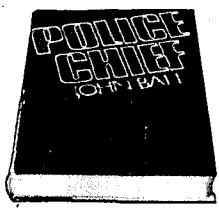

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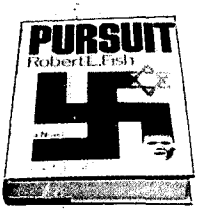

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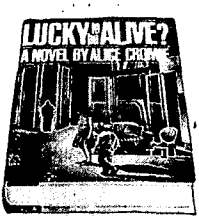

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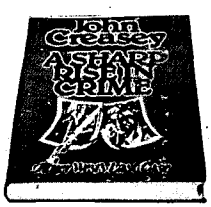

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